

ADDRESSING UNHEALTHY HELP THROUGH
PASTORAL PREACHING'S IMPACT
ON GRIEVING CONGREGANTS

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ABSTRACT

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This project's context is the New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando. The problem is that members of NCBC have not been sufficiently equipped to help congregants that are grieving because of death. If a group of NCBC members participate in a sermon series aimed at helping congregants grieve in a healthy way, then these members will be equipped to help themselves and congregants process their grief. Qualitative methods will be used to observe participants' responses. The purpose of this project is for members to have a stronger biblical understanding of death so they will be more equipped to navigate grief.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This acknowledgement and note of thanks start with all praise to our God. May the name of the Lord be praised for trusting me with this sacred assignment of addressing the important topic death, dying, and grief. I am humbled by the opportunity to steward this work and I give glory to God for empowering me to see it through.

To the leadership and membership of the New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando, I owe a debt of gratitude. The church's prayers for me and patience with me over the past three years showed me, and everyone, how a loving church operates. May we grow together for many more years. The participants of this projects hold a special place in my heart as their input has been invaluable – thank you all. Special thanks to Deacon Beverly Hudgins, Sister Erica Jones, and Minister Brandon McRae who served as my context associates.

I extend my sincere thanks to my professional associates, Richard Anderson, M.D., Rev. LaKeisha Cook, DMin, and Amanda Green, J.D. Extreme gratitude is also extended to Dr. Darlene Cook who served as my peer associate and with M. Evans, T. Evans, H. Hawkins, and B. Smith and me as one of the cohorts' 'senior choir' members. To the gifted group of men and woman that make up the Pointer-Brown-Goodmen Fellows, may God's best be yours as you work the ministry task assigned to you.

Dr. Pointer, Dr. Brown and Dr. Goodman continue to be a model of ministry excellence and I owe a debt of gratitude to them for stellar work as a mentor to my cohort

and me. Their minds, ministry, and motivation are invaluable. Several people have extended special encouragement to me along the way at the pivotal time that I needed support during this process. Pastors Darrel Hairston, Dale McBean, and Charles Williams, Jr. deserve appreciation for being a consistent voice of encouragement for me. My pastor, Dr. Haywood Robinson, III gave me his personal approval when I entered this process and remained the inspiration I needed to do well and go far. I acknowledge my loving family for their continued support and prayers during this journey. Our Monday night zoom prayer calls have grounded me and offered me hope. Many thanks to my father, Leroy Rose, Jr. for being exactly everything I need him to be, always.

Last, and most important, is my thanks to Nordia Patricia Rose and my five heartbeats. Nordia has supported me, encouraged me, prayed for me, and proofread for me. For all of that and more, I am truly grateful. I pray that Jasmine, Jeremiah, Janae, Joy, and Jaya will let this entire project and process serve as indication that you can accomplish anything. I love you with my whole heart.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to Shelia D. Rose, my beloved mother, whose death I grieve and whose life I celebrate. My mother led me to Christ. Her life modeled care and compassion. Her transition to life eternal is the foundational inspiration for this research.

Each day as I remember her life, I pray that I may impact others with love, sensitivity and compassion. In her honor, I wish to help other pastors and ministry leaders in their ministry to those dealing with death and grief. God be my help.

INTRODUCTION

It happened again. I was on a text thread with other Christian believers and the goal of this communication this time was to offer condolences. In the midst of that effort, it happened. One of the ministers on the thread, attempting to console another person in the group message, did it. He said, "I'm so sorry to hear about her transition; she finally got her heavenly wings!"

While this attempt to comfort was surely well intended, it was not based on biblical truths and is likely to offer more confusion than comfort. The temporary good feeling that possibly came from the ill-informed comment would certainly soon dissipate. All statements will eventually have to stand against the truth. Such is the case for unhealthy attempts of consolation surrounding death.

The intent to offer comfort and help is absolutely noble. It also could have come from a conditioned mind and mouth, a biblically sensitive, and aware being. This is to say that a statement of truth could have offered the same amount of hope with the one difference that makes it worth it all -- lasting truth. This is the type of comfort that lasts. Further, it is the only type of comfort.

There is a need for pastors to regularly preach the biblical truths surrounding death, dying, and grieving. This topic is often overlooked or only dealt with on the surface during sermonic moments. One possible reason is because of the many unknowns concerning death. Some may think that the weight of things that have yet to be fully

comprehended is so heavy that it warrants no lifting of the information that is understood. They think that their responsibility is to handle this topic comprehensively or not at all, exhaustively, or without one word. This is tragic. This thought leaves too many parishioners vulnerable to the unhealthy help that is certainly to come their way from many angles. It also primes those who wish to offer help without the necessary tools and biblical perspective to be successful in offering help.

Another reason preachers tend to avoid the topic of death, dying, and grief is the sensitive nature of the topic. Hurt, disappointment, fragile emotions, and even depression can be triggered just by the mentioning of the death of a loved one. Even further, a person's own mortality has a way of pushing them to a place of reflection that has the potential of being frightful. So, many ministers who are aware of this very normal human condition try to navigate this tender topic in a way that would not cause damage to those that are intending to positively assist. Being aware of its sensitivity and intentionality in the approach is right and necessary; avoiding the topic altogether is irresponsible.

The preacher who will be effective in helping those who are dealing with death and grief will learn to be aware of their congregants' triggers and have appropriate support in place to minister to those needs. Often a counselor on standby is the order of the day. Also, being strategic about the timing, tone, and word choice of the presentations will be just as important. There are certainly risks that are involved with addressing the topic of death, dying, and grieving regularly, but those risks are not so overwhelming that the reward is not in view.

Still, I believe there is a way to address this needed discussion and it is possible for the help that others offer to the bereaved to be healthy. Therefore, this is a project that

I wish to explore within the context of the leadership of The New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando.

This project is projected to investigate the impact of pastoral preaching on the health of the congregation's grieving process. Currently, a survey of my context reveals a level of seemingly low comprehension of the biblical perspective of death, dying, and grief. This is evidenced by the unhealthy help that is often offered by the congregants.

There will be examination of John chapter eleven to serve as the biblical Foundation for this project (chapter two). In the scriptures, close attention will be given to the actual words of comfort that Jesus offers the grieving sisters of Lazarus. The truth of what Jesus says is the foundation of effective comfort and help. As a model for pastors and preachers, speaking the truth about death and the hope of resurrection is powerful enough to console those that grieve.

Then, a historical look at how St. John Chrysostom was able to use the power of persuasive speech and preaching to be an effective leader of the early church (chapter three). This survey will certainly highlight how Chrysostom moved to the place of mastering effective communication and the impact of his preaching models for those who preach today. It should be seen that effective oral communication of the truths about God is able to have a lasting impact on people as well as the church at large. Chrysostom is remembered today as a powerful observance of the Christian faith.

Next a look at Process Theology will serve as the theological foundation of this project (chapter four). Grief is often looked at as a process, that is no particular linear fashion of dealing with the death of a loved one. With this in mind, the theological perspective that asserts that everything is in motion and undergoing change, including

God, is appropriate for this study. God becoming or making God self, exactly what the circumstance declares is needed stands as the highlight of this foundational survey.

Lastly, a consideration will be given to the interdisciplinary foundation, which is rhetoric communication (chapter five). This communication tool speaks to the theory that persuasive presentation enhances communication effectiveness. The preacher's use of rhetoric often comes natural but certainly must be refined to ensure that the presentation concerning the topic of death, dying, and grief is one that is received well by those that hear.

Together, these four areas of foundation will serve as the platform from which the hypothesis will be tested. The principles gleaned from the foundational areas will be implemented as the sermon series is developed and preached. It is with high hopes that the effectiveness of preaching on the topic of death, dying, and grieving will serve as impactful for congregants.

Chapter six presents the findings of this research. A close look was given to the participant's response to the pre- and post-questionnaire as well as the information revealed from the post-sermon discussions and journal entries. The apparent trends and anecdotal outcomes will be analyzed and formulated into important takeaways. As a result of the study, recommendations to senior leadership of African American churches will be offered.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Sometimes the most difficult topics to discuss are the most important ones. Such is the case with the topics of death, dying, and grief. These topics, combined, are extremely important and often not discussed. This truth is evident as we look at our society at large and specifically the family and the church. There is a need to give attention to the sensitive topic in a way that would normalize the conversation surrounding death.

This chapter will discuss the factors that have contributed to the assertion that more preaching surrounding death, dying, and grief is needed in African American churches. My contextual analysis corresponding with my ministry journey undergirds this assertion. After sharing details of both, that is context and journey, it will be noted that a natural convergence of the two have yielded my suspected claim regarding the necessary benefit of systematic preaching on the topic. As a foundational guide for this chapter, here is the basic hypothesis of study: If a select group of NCBC ministry leaders participate in a sermon series and post-sermon discussions aimed at helping congregants grieve in a healthy way, then these ministry leaders will be equipped to help themselves and parishioners process the grief they experience because of death.

Allow me to introduce my context. Since 2006, I have served the New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando in two capacities – youth pastor and senior pastor. The

twenty-seven-year-old church, located in the heart of the economically challenged and crime-ridden Holden Heights community of Orlando Florida, serves as a hub for homeless, hungry, and hurting individuals. While the church sits in the inner city, most of our membership drive into our campus for worship, fellowship, and service opportunities. Very few people walk or catch the local bus to come to the church, except for the students that come to the alternative high school housed on our site. The school along with the ongoing functions of the church, the membership's activities and missions outreach make for a lively seven days a week church operation.

Historical Setting

In 1992, the church that serves as context for this project was established. This move came because of a season of turbulence with the leadership and membership of a well-known and highly respected Baptist Church. Within just a year of the new pastor and congregation relationship, an unfortunate battle began between the pastor and the deacons. Surfacing from that tension-filled exchange was the determination to experience something liberating and new. The pastor of that church felt the call to remain in that area and sought the Lord about what the next steps should be.

The New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando was then established in the hearts and minds of its founders – husband and wife ministry team. These two are the vessels through which this new ministry was started and sustained. The husband of this team was a preacher, and the expertise of the wife was the gift of administration. The wonderful duo gave the church the strong start that was needed for a church that was planned and then started in less than a year. Most church plants or church-starts spend well over a year

preparing before going live with worship services and ongoing gatherings. For this ministry, regular weekly Sunday meetings were observed from day one; this separated the new church from many others.

Additionally, this new church plant started with two-hundred eighty-nine members from its day of foundation. Those who signed the charter of the church on that Wednesday night organizational meeting were designated as charter members of the New Covenant Baptist Church. A new church with such a substantial number of people is quite unusual but would prove to be beneficial. The benefit of the larger number of founding members is that there are more people that would have a vested interest in the health, vitality, and longevity of the ministry. In most cases, the people who give of their time and talent in the beginning stages of something are the ones that tend to have a stronger connection and deeper commitment to that thing. The church is no different. In fact, it is to be noted that maturity and the age of many of these founding members was the catalyst for such behavior. As to be explored later, those same factors are a cause of natural death and the resultant grief. Simply stated the church was soon to experience an abundance of death within the congregation.

On the flip side of that coin is the issue surrounding the prevalent thought of ownership of the church that was exhibited by some of the founding members. Since there is a fine line between investment and entitlement, this delicate issue often surfaces. It is even said at times that certain privileges ought to be afforded to charter members simply because of that status. This unfortunate mindset has the potential to poison the people and the cohesive culture that they worked hard to achieve. Just one individual that believes that they are exempt from established rules or generally accepted procedures or

practices can be detrimental. Two or more of this kind can prove to be damaging to the ministry. If no other church knows this, this new church plant should. Adding the dynamic of death and grief to this set of environmental factors, was sure to be a difficult path to tread as a new church.

New Covenant was started because of a church split. This truth is not often discussed, but it is a known fact. Whenever the beginning of the church is mentioned, it is done without using language that would affirm the painful situation from which it was birthed. “God led us...,” and “the Lord put it on the hearts of...” is always the package used for the telling of the history. Those statements are certainly true. God did lead, and the Lord did impress upon hearts. Along with this truth is an additional set of realities. Church leadership personalities and feelings of importance lead to an uprising against the pastor and a plot to get him out. That was the environment that gave space for that pastor to leave the established church and to start the new one. However, Orlando was a great place for this church plant because of the number of transplant retirees that had come south to live and enjoy their second season of life.

Orlando Florida is in the central region of Florida, thus bearing the categorization of Central Florida. From Daytona Beach westward to Tampa, Orlando sets as the center point of the Interstate-4 corridor and has become the center point of the state. Orlando is in second place as the most visited location by domestic travelers. Surprising to some, this placement is higher on the list than Las Vegas, Hawaii, New York and our neighboring city – Miami.¹

¹ Victor Kiprop, "The Ten Most Popular Vacations in the US," World Atlas, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-10-most-popular-vacations-in-the-us.html>.

While Orlando is in the heart of Florida, our community sits in the heart of the city of Orlando and Orange County Florida. Our church campus sits outside of downtown Orlando. The urban setting of the campus makes for a fairly busy area where the main road is frequently used by many as primary throughway for the varied activities of the community. The church is considered as a main ‘hub’ for outreach assistance for all types of needs in the Holden Heights community of the city of Orlando. According to the World Atlas, “Tourism is a booming industry in Orlando, boasting more than 50 million tourists annually. Quality healthcare, recreational facilities, quality education and modern infrastructure have all fueled the increasing population in Orlando over the years.”²

The church seems to be very typical regarding its general makeup. Two-thirds of the church’s members are female, leaving our male membership in the minority.³ The age specific demography of the church is as it relates to the 1065 members active on roll has the following breakdown. There are eight members in the congregation who are ninety years old or older. Sixty-four of the members are between the ages of eighty and eighty-nine. In the age range of seventy through seventy-nine, there are 115 members. There are 187 members that are age sixty through sixty-nine.⁴

Over thirty-five percent of the active congregants are above the age of sixty. This glaring number is a stark reminder that the years of life yet to be lived on earth may be far less than the years lived up to this point. Those in the generation under them, will be

² Benjamin Elisha Sawe, "Biggest Cities in Florida," World Atlas, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/biggest-cities-in-florida.html>.

³ Evelyn Betts, e-mail message to author, January 24, 2022.

⁴ Evelyn Betts, e-mail message to author, January 24, 2022.

forced to witness the decline of the older generation and possibly funeralize them as well.

This reality has made an impact on the nature of our church.

The question that surfaces is whether the church has prepared its members to deal with the truth presented beforehand. Are Christian values and perspectives able to help congregants navigate the uncertainty of life in the face of death? How ‘Christian’ are those who are a part of the church? Orlando is forty-nine on the list on The Most Post-Christian Cities in America: 2019.⁵ We are in the middle of the list of cities that do not really believe in God. This means that about half of our population is God conscious while the other half really is not God conscious. According to the Barna Group’s report⁶ over fifty percent of our city disagree that faith is important in their lives. The same percentage applies for those that have not prayed to God (in the last week), have never made a commitment to Jesus, have not attended a Christian church (in the last six months), and have not read the Bible (in the last week). Of this list, the first mentioned stands out most. This is especially the case for issues dealing with death and dying as it overlaps with the importance of faith in their lives. The conversation about death is best held with the concept of faith as the grounding source.

Looking at the same statistic always reveals the fact there is a possibility that the percentage attached to those that believed, has more to do with the amount of belief that

⁵ Barna Researchers, “The Most Post-Christian Cities in America: 2019,” Barna Group, <https://www.barna.com/research/post-christian-cities-2019/#.XIVaPieLqvU.gmail>.

⁶ Barna Researchers, “The Most Post-Christian Cities in America: 2019,” <https://www.barna.com/research/post-christian-cities-2019/#.XIVaPieLqvU.gmail>.

each person had in God as opposed to how many believed. Instead of half of the population believing, it ought to be noted that the population only half-way believed.

If this later view is adopted, then the outlook is even more dim. It would have been one thing to have half of a community that had full, heartfelt belief. Instead, we may have a whole community of people that only partially believe, leaving the area with almost none with complete faith in God. A believing community is all too often more of an ideal than it is reality.

Fortunately, the amount of faith displayed in the context in which I was raised was a little different from the current state of my ministry context and community. As an exhaustive survey of my ministry journey is done, the need for faith in the face of the reality of death, dying, and grief surfaces periodically.

Ministry Journey

It was that time again. It was time to stand to declare the Word of the Lord and this time was a bit different from the multiple times I had to stand before. Having preached for close to thirty years and having the responsibility to do so regularly for the past ten, I was not prepared for the emotion I felt on that specific Sunday during this service. A load of grief set on my shoulders in a way that it had not rested in recent times. In that exact moment, grief was a burden that was difficult to shake.

This incident occurred just a few days after starting on the journey to survey my life and the path that got me here. To reflect, several questions surfaced. They began to serve as the foundation of the intentional review of my spiritual autobiography. What was

the trigger? Have I been in that space before? Why did I feel so alone? What can help in these moments?

There is an old hymn of the church that is titled “Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand.” This is the song that the choir decided to sing. The congregation loved it, but from my perspective, it was hard to hear. The choir sang the wrong song. Maybe it was the right song, but it was just sung at the wrong time. It was the hymn of preparation for the day. They sang this same song at the early service, and it had no major impact on my emotional state. However, this time it did. As I sat there, it dawned on me that the lyrics to this song were the last words I heard my mother speak to me.

Yes, my mother died when I was twenty-one years old. This was the senior year of my sojourn at Virginia Union University. I thought my mother had been upgraded because of her improvements physically. She was not on the ventilator; she only had oxygen. It was not until sometime later that the report offered clarity to the fact that mom removed herself off of the breathing device. She somehow pulled the tube out, against medical best practices. Their clarification was sobering, but it was not able to steal the precious time I was given to hear my mother’s voice again. In a faint whisper my mother addressed me. She started signing to me. It was as if she had a direct message for her son. “Hold to his hand, God’s unchanging hand. Hold to his hand, God’s unchanging hand. Build your hopes on things eternal. Hold to God’s unchanging hand.” This was the last time I would hear my mother’s voice and the message she gave me was rich. She died just a few days later.

Looking back, I see how quickly things went bad. An emergency room visit on Thanksgiving weekend – November 27, 1998 – was the start. My mother was admitted into the hospital and the staff started with several tests. The test results continued to show that there was some type of infection going on in my mother's body. With no clear answers as to what was going on, an exploratory surgery took place a few weeks after. The doctor exited the operating room and came to address my father, sisters, and me. He told us that everything went well. To this day, I still disagree with him. How did everything go well when my mother never was able to fully breathe on her own? How did everything go well when my mother was never able to talk, walk, or interact with her family after that? With the number of difficulties arising in my mother's health as the days went by, it began to seem like the likelihood of her recovering on this side of glory was possible. Still, I prayed sincere prayers of faith. I trusted God for her healing. God decided differently. My mother died on January 3, 1999.

While this was a devastating time in my life, I had to finish school, so I swiftly returned to business as usual. I went back to Richmond, Virginia and enrolled in my last semester of college. Everyone there knew I was a preacher and maybe that was the reason that very few people offered great support. Maybe they thought that I had already preached, counseled, and praised myself whole after such a major loss. Isn't that what preachers do? Don't those that preach self-soothe all their wounds and self-heal after substantial emotional injury? These are the questions that the masses seem to have asked instinctively and internally. The questions also revealed the unfair assumptions that were the foundation beneath the reasoning for their interaction with me as I dealt with my loss.

Back to life as normal was the order of the day for me. Staying busy with a focus on college graduation somehow allowed my moments of thinking about my mother to become fewer and fewer as the days and months went by. Strangely, I even became slightly irritated when others spent too much time and energy rehashing the story of my mother's transition along with the continual visit to her graveside. I am not sure why I felt that way, but it made for a smooth way for me to put my focus elsewhere.

To that point, there were a few times during this period of my mother's sickness and subsequent transition that prompted reflection and there were fewer people that truly comforted me. The first reflective moment was watchnight 1999. It was the words of one of the members that pushed me into a space of self-reflection. "Why are you here?" This question hit me squarely in the face and made me question my faith. Why was I at this service while my mother was hospitalized? Was I living with balance or was I being neglectful? Was there really something for me to do with my mother in the state and where did she really want me to be? I was reflective and conflicted. My mother died just three days later, and the reflection period was magnified. Then, the next intense time of self-reflection, as it related to this tragic death, came during my post-funeral discussion with my sister about the care that our mother received while hospitalized. We both had an unsettled feeling that something wrong took place. Medical malpractice is probably too strong of a description for our surmised assessment, but there was certainly one word that never left out conversation – carelessness. This consideration consumed me. I began to question my faith in the belief I had in the sovereignty and healing power of God.

These two points of reflection became my silent internal struggle. At certain moments, the impulse to dwell there was more intense than others. In fact, I was often longing for someone to offer consolation, or maybe counsel, which came few and far in between. So, I had to keep moving and working; I had to keep this entire situation off of my mind.

The one time that I received the type of consoling that was helpful was during a long car ride from Richmond to Baltimore with my younger cousin. Sherice seemed not to know what to say to me about the death of my mother and her older cousin that she considered her aunt. Her inability to find the right words led to long periods of silence. Thank God for the silence. Praise God for her avoiding the temptation to have empty conversation that would over spiritualize what I was going through. Sherice operated out of ignorance, but the interaction was divine. My mother was gone as she did not try to make that okay. I needed more people like Sherice around me. This entire period of my mother's sickness and death was a pivotal point in my spiritual journey and remains the reoccurring vantage point from which my life's perspective is set.

Another experience that shaped my college years had to do with two people from my childhood church that I loved – Tony Moore and Maude Coleman. My father called and left a message on my voicemail. “Call me, son,” the message replayed. Hearing this made my heart drop; my father rarely called me. Leaving a voice message was absolutely out of the ordinary. One of my closest friends, the church's musician, died suddenly and unexpectedly. Tony and I were very tight. I was the choir director for the mass choir; that was the choir that Tony played for on three of the four Sundays of each month. In addition to this connection, Tony was my cleaning partner. Every Saturday night,

sometimes into Sunday mornings, the two of us cleaned the church in preparation for Sunday service. There was probably more singing and rehearsing going on than actual cleaning. He was a true friend and he died at the age of twenty-three.

Tony's grandmother, our pastor – Dr. Maude H. Coleman was also sick during this time and subsequently died six months later. This was extremely hard for me as she was the one that gave me a strong foundation in the things of God. When I wrestled with my call to preach, the Lord used her to acknowledge the call and give me an opportunity to move forward in such. The messages that she preached and the correction she provided have long lingered in my life to bring about positive practices and core values. She has remained a standard to successful ministry and proof that God can call and use females in pastoral ministry. It was terribly difficult to understand why the Lord allowed these two important people to transition out of my life so close to each other. Was this preparing me for my own mother's transition?

Barely into my adulthood, I was engaged and married. At the age of nineteen, I married the love of my life – Nordia Patricia Wiggins. We met at church when we were thirteen years old. About two years after our first meeting, one of the ladies at the church crafted a plan to set us up. The Lord must have shown her that we were supposed to be together. Our relationship grew through the varying ups and downs of teenage love. Though having a different start to the marriage, there is a special grace on my marriage. Nordia was pregnant with our first child prior to our wedding. The young preacher got the choir's greatest alto pregnant. This disrupted the status quo for me. This brought about a level of shame and isolation. But has also allowed for my wife and I to cling

together closer because of the outside pressures coming against us. There is something about adversities and challenges that foster teamwork in those forced to face it.

Six months after our March 1997 wedding, our first child – Jasmine Alaya – was born. I remembered crying more than she did. My tears were flowing because of the realization that I was now entrusted with the responsibility of raising this precious gift from God. Since then, we have had four additional children – Jeremiah Andrew, Janae Ayana, Joy Aniya and Jaya Alese. My family is, and always will be, my priority in my ministry and life. I am committed to support, serve, and sacrifice for my family – particularly my wife and children.

While some of the family dynamics bring extreme joy, there are other parts that still cause some pain. It was during these adult years that all my living grandparents, which was three at that time, took ill. As it relates to my fraternal grandmother, this sickness and care for her was especially tough. The extended family had to rally together to develop a schedule to provide her the care she needed after her leg was amputated. My wife and I, along with our oldest daughter, took turns with aunts and uncles to give grandma a bath and prepare her food. The very small things she did for me, we now had to do for her. This role reversal surely messed with my mind. It was a pleasure serving the one that sacrificed so much for others, including me; it was difficult seeing her suffer. My grandmother died less than a year after becoming a limb amputee.

My grandfather, Rosa Lee's husband, died four months after his wife. And less than a year later, my mother's father died as well. Each of these transitions were difficult

by themselves but all three, compounded, seemed unbearable at the time. I had the responsibility to preach the funeral service of all three of my grandparents.

In my early adult years, I left the church of my childhood and joined Calvary Baptist Church in Baltimore. I came to that church specifically out of a relationship with the church's pastor. I thank God for that connection. Pastor Haywood A. Robinson, III called me to invite me to serve with him at Calvary Baptist Church as minister to young adults. What shocked me about the call most was not the invitation, but his expression of humility. I can distinctly remember him saying "Haywood Robinson calling." There was no title, no pretension. The call was simple. The introduction was unassuming and yet it was clearly God-authorized; and Pastor Robinson confidently displayed such. The combination of humility and confidence struck a chord and was something I began to admire and emulate.

There are very few people that have had an impact on my life and ministry like Pastor Robinson. His consistent model of Christ-like living has allowed many lessons to be gleaned. These lessons are ones that have mostly been caught as opposed to taught. Just hanging around him and serving him afforded me the chance to see effective ministry models. Without great intention and even without recognizing the shift, my preaching began to be structured like my pastor's. My style of ministry and approach to people are closely aligned to that of Pastor Robinson's ministry. Even though I did not preach my initial sermon under his leadership, he is my pastor – to this day.

Ministry progression continued to take place over my adult years. For some reason, I began to do ministry work isolated, though. I had the mindset of doing what

needs to be done myself as not to be let down by others. I tried to spiritualize it by saying that I was made to fly alone. This thought pattern had me timid and afraid, with an internal desire to people-please. What I realized is that the lone ranger syndrome has fueled unaddressed needs and the silent cry and hunger for attention. To top things off, my frequent interaction with death and the grief that resulted from such have shaped who I am in ministry today.

Comparing both my context and my ministerial journey has revealed a natural synergy. Just about every major move in life and ministry coincided, almost as in collided with, death and loss. There are at least three major times of death that warrants our attention.

Death of my Mother

The first death that had a major impact on my life and ministry was the death of my mother in 1999. No one's death up to that point, and even since then, has compared to the magnitude of loss experienced by my mother's death.

There are still moments when profound grief grabs me, and memories take me to a place where only a scriptural perspective of death helps. As previously noted, thinking about the life of my mother often brings joy; however, it is also mixed with the heavy burden of sadness as I consider how her joy-filled life on earth ended. After many days of sincere prayer for the healing of my mother, she transitioned. The impact this had on my life is still felt to this day.

Death of my Pastor

As explored earlier, I was twenty years old when my beloved pastor died. This unimaginable thing happened to a newly licensed preacher. This preacher was devastated. Who was going to pour onto that young preacher? What was going to be the necessary guide that the preacher was sure to need? Would this young minister be able to move forward in ministry while carrying grief and missing a mentor? Without a doubt, while dealing with this circumstance is possible, it certainly was not easy. It was not easy. This young preacher was me.

Moving forward in ministry without the pastor that had been the counselor for me during the difficult season was no longer available. To add to that, the reason for this new difficulty was that absence. It felt like a double whammy. To combat this new dynamic in my life there was a push toward the scriptures to find a perspective that could possibly help. Bible lessons surrounding death and dying were offered to me and I tried to absorb the heart of those lessons in order to find some grounding for my faith.

This death did not impact me only, the church that I attended seems to have never recovered from the devastation of our pastor's death. Quick, forced, unvetted leadership was put in place in the height of the grief. An overzealous attempt to not dismiss the work and reputation of the deceased pastor began. That pastor's name never left the printed material nor the lips of any person that spoke, for any reason and at any time, in that congregation. There seemed to be a fixation with giving honor to the former pastor to the point that there was heaviness that hindered most from seeing beyond this tragic loss. The death of my pastor and the reality of that local church's response to such, are part of the primary reasons that this project is necessary.

Death of Grandparents

The death of my grandparents is another instance in which my life was changed by the concept and reality of death and dying. As noted before three of the four of my grandparents died and I was responsible for preaching the funeral of each. The death of my maternal grandfather was one of those funerals. Then, on my father's side, I preached two very difficult funerals as I was closer to my grandmother and grandfather on that side. Those two deaths really hit me hard as I was in the height of ministry and the one responsible to lead the family and so many others during that time of death. I had to lead while grieving. I was tasked with helping others while needing assistance in the grieving process myself.

It is the church's response to death that needs to be explored. In fact, there are several points of convergence between the presented ministry journey and the ministry context. A sufficient look at the items that intersect reveals a necessary focus for this ministry project.

Age of the Church Members and the Number of Funerals

The average age of the members of the New Covenant Baptist Church is sixty and older. This blessing also comes with a level of burden that can only be described as lingering and eventual transition of the saints while we celebrate the death of a saint it also has a toll on those who were left behind.

In close to thirty years of ministry, I have witnessed very unhealthy help. This shows up at the most vulnerable time in a person's life, when they are grieving. This is the time when people need help most and the unfortunate reality is that too many are not

equipped to offer the help that is really needed. There is a difference between willingness to offer help and ability to offer the same. Thank God for willingness, the desire, and the aim of being the support needed for someone in the difficult season. This is admirable and noteworthy, however if it is not done skillfully, it could be more detrimental than helpful.

I have personally witnessed the help that was intended but not delivered upon. Insensitive comments and untrue thoughts are often thrown in the face of the one who grieves. This is not an assumption; this is the summary of what has been seen over and over again. In fact, the unfortunate reality of the supposed helpful intention actually caused harm.

Coronavirus- 19

In March 2020, the reality of the health emergency that many in the United States took notice of from afar, began to hit home. Not only were churches abruptly closed, but lives were also suddenly interrupted because of sickness. Being ill and dealing with the coronavirus turned out to be just the tip of the iceberg; many people died because of the pandemic.

The rapid path from sickness to death shocked just about everyone as they looked at this once in a lifetime tragedy. The United States of America experienced over one million deaths because of covid-19.⁷ This fact impacted the church as well. At an unprecedented rate people were thrust into being faced with the news about the death of a family or friend. Even more than that, people had to hear over and over again about

⁷ CDC, "COVID Data Tracker," Covid CDC, <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>.

how others, that they did not necessarily know, were dying at these alarming rates. This seemed to send many into a state of confession and possibly depressing as there was no way to have known how to deal with this magnitude of talk of death and thoughts about death.

In many ways the thought of death was a real fear for most people. Because of this invisible virus that had taken the life of so many, people had to live wondering if their lot would be the same; mortality became the prevalent thought during this season of life. The unfortunate reality is that while people were thinking about it, there was not much talk about it. Death, dying, and grief were frequently under-discussed topics that were mentioned only at funerals. Beyond that, the topics were left not fully addressed. Even the use of the word, death, when spoken out loud is triggering for most people living in the age of Covid-19.

In conclusion, there is no way to deny the direction of the needed project that addresses this particular issue in the church. For sure, the heavy topic of death, dying, and grief is that needed area of discussion. Discussions of death during funeral preparation and during the funeral service itself has proven not to be enough. Grief counseling sessions after a person has been hit with a devastating loss is also good but not as beneficial as pre-planned opportunities to get acquainted with the heavy topic of death, dying, and grieving. To combat this, we believe that a pastor's responsible preaching of the biblical topics concerning death and practical principles concerning navigating grief is necessary.

If a select group of NCBC ministry leaders participate in a sermon series and post-sermon discussions aimed at helping congregants grieve in a healthy way, then these

ministry leaders will be equipped to help themselves and parishioners process the grief they experience because of death.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

To prove the necessities of discussion around and sermons on death, dying and grief, a firm foundation should be established. One of the things on which this foundation should be established is scripture. As with most things, the word of God is the strong foundation that offers a model for the practical way that people can live and handle difficult seasons and issues of life. Facing death and dealing with grief is no different. It is biblical support that is needed.

John chapter eleven tells the story of a family dealing with death and grief. To add to this devastating position, this family has a direct connection to the one that gives life – Jesus. This connection, however, did not exempt them from experiencing this loss. The text chronicles the interaction between the grieving sisters and Jesus. While the actions of Jesus are noteworthy, it is what He says that really serves as the healthy help that the sisters needed. The Words of Christ aided them in this situation. There is a key principle lifted from this biblical foundation: saying the correct thing at the right time is what those grieving need most.

John 11:17-27 is the focused text for this study and project foundation. Within the scope of this biblical narrative, there are many twists and turns that surround the sickness, death and eventual resurrection of a character named Lazarus. This text is one of the clearest Bible stories that address the response of Jesus Christ to the concept of death,

dying, and grief. The response noted in this text seems to be clear for at least two reasons. First, the response that we highlighted is a response that surfaces in the face of an actual death. The commentary surrounding this pericope is not only theoretical in nature; Lazarus really died. This is important because there are many biblical instances where there is a discussion about death and how it relates to others, without there being a current physical death to ground the conversation. Real and raw emotional details, along with the immediate burden of dealing with such, somehow gives an additional level of validity to the discussion. This discord is grounded by an actual death.

Secondly, this text is apropos to speak in the dialogue of death, dying, and grief because of the fact that Jesus speaks to the topic himself. It will be seen that this is not a situation where someone speaks about the thoughts of Christ. It is not even a time where one of the biblical heroes speaks about something that Christ has said. Here, Christ is speaking himself. He is speaking for himself. In the old tradition of some written scripture manuscripts, two sections of red font are sure to be found within these ten verses. This is significant and warrants focused attention of this text.

As an intentional dive into several biblical study criticisms and exegesis of the eleventh chapter of John is employed, the goal is to gain a deep and thorough understanding of the foundation message that has been presented. Likewise, practical principles for application in the context of the bereaved and the process of grieving are sure to be garnered. With those goals in mind the following will be a part of this examination: words study, literary criticisms, and verse-by-verse themes.

Here is the text that commands our attention:

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the

Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”¹

The author of the Book of John is John the son of Zebedee. We are first introduced to him in the earliest parts of the gospels where John along with his brother James met Jesus as they were mending their nets. In this they had been thought to be in a spot where they were either cleaning up after a fishing expedition or preparing for a fishing adventure. Either way it was during a time of work that they were met by Jesus. After Peter and Andrew had consented to follow Jesus, John was part of the next small group that left their boat and their loved ones to follow Jesus as well. This is noteworthy as we think about the love and commitment that John had, we are now faced with the consideration of a difficult experience by people who also loved Jesus. John is able to masterfully write about this experience.

The gospel according to John was written possibly as early as in the 60s or 70s CE, although its final version was not completely composed until 90 through 110 CE. In an effort to present the truth about Christ to those who were recent followers of Christ, John wrote this gospel. Out of the four gospels, the Book of John is the one not considered a synoptic gospel simply because of the different vantage point from which John writes. It should also be noted that John desired to speak directly to believers, those

¹ All biblical citations are from New American Standard Bible, unless otherwise noted, John 11:17-27.

who had a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is in his writings here that it is seen how John focuses heavily on believing and faith. In fact, at the end of this pericope that we are studying, John speaks directly to the heart of the matter as it relates to death, dying, and grief and the presence of God's power in resurrection. John asked the question "Do you believe this?" (Jn. 11:26, NASB).

It is very likely that John was living in Ephesus at the time that he wrote this gospel about belief. As early churches were being formed there, this gospel was certainly some help in the faith formation of the believer. In fact, those who had questions about death and Resurrection would certainly be answered as this incident in the life of Jesus was chronicled by John.

The eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John comes just after Jesus offered lessons about the Good Shepherd and how the shepherd knows his sheep. Then in the chapter after eleven, there is a wonderful picture of the ceremonial blessing from a worshiper in preparation for the eventual death of Jesus. Therefore, surrounding chapter eleven we see the love that Jesus offers his sheep or children and then it is followed by the expression of love that the Lord offers through his pending sacrificial death. The placement of the sickness and death of Lazarus in chapter eleven is sandwiched right between the two expressions of Christ's love.

Love then becomes an essential component of this biblical foundation that must be discussed. Looking at love against the backdrop of death and grief is explored in this chapter. Jesus loved Lazarus and yet sickness and death still showed up. Jesus loved his disciples enough to teach them a lesson about His will as it relates to resurrection. Jesus loved the sisters of Lazarus and showed such by the way he offered comfort to them

through his actions and most importantly through his speech. What Jesus says to the sisters shows a model for how to speak words of comfort to those who are dealing with the death of a loved one and their own grief.

There are several movements within this chapter of the Book of John. It opens with the sickness and death of Lazarus and then moves into a discourse about Resurrection and Jesus being life. This discourse is the portion of the text on which this study hinges. After that, Jesus speaks about The Last Enemy being destroyed; that last enemy is death. Toward the end of the chapter Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. This offered hope to those who were around during that time and hope for those who read this text here and now. Chapter eleven however, closes out with the unfortunate but necessary truth about those who plotted to kill Jesus. This chapter opened with the death of one of Jesus's loved ones, and it closes with religious leaders trying to ensure death would be the end of Jesus.

Moving to the pericope of which attention should be given, there are ten verses that show the extent of the comfort that the Lord was able to provide. John 11:17-27 is the portion of scripture that deals directly with the aftermath of Lazarus' death and the moments before he was raised from the dead. As mentioned, the bulk of the chapter deals with the sickness and death of Lazarus and the miraculous raising of Lazarus. At first glance, it may seem that there is no connection between the experience with Lazarus and the plot to kill Jesus. "There are clearly many other things we might have liked to learn: what Lazarus experienced in the grave, the nature and time of his subsequent death, what he did or did not say to his neighbors, and more. John reports none of it. Everything is

sacrificed to the sign itself, to what it anticipates, and even to the way it precipitates it by arousing the animus of the authorities.”²

As it relates to this pericope’s placement in the Book of John, it is placed just before the beginning of the end of Jesus’ ministry on earth, that is before Christ’s own death and resurrection, which is the reason He came. Without a doubt, the portion of scripture serves as a platform upon which it can be proven again that Jesus is God. The deity of Christ is the overall theme of the entire Gospel of John.

The story of God as it is portrayed in the Bible does not stand in conflict with the lessons presented in this passage. Humans will always have questions and the divine is willing to entertain such. This integration between Creator and creations ends with God displaying omnipotence. This is seen all throughout scripture and certainly echoed as Jesus responds to Mary and Martha as well as raising Lazarus. God interacts in a powerful way with his creation.

Martha, in verse twenty-two, says to Jesus that anything He asks of God, God would do it. While this may seem like a statement of faith, it also denotes a clear picture of where Martha’s faith was at the time. Vincent notes, “the verb αἰτέω is used of the asking of an inferior from a superior. Ἐρωτάω is to ask on equal terms, and hence is always used by Christ of His own asking from the Father, in the consciousness of His equal dignity.”³ Martha’s reference to Jesus without recognizing his deity gives weight to the ministry of Jesus and the goal of this gospel of showing Jesus as God.

² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, “The Pillar New Testament Commentary” (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 420.

³ Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 202.

In verse twenty-five, Jesus offers a response to the grieving sisters. He says that He is the resurrection and the life. It opens with 'I am.' ἐγώ εἰμι gives the translation - *egō eimi*, which means that Jesus exists. "The words *I am* are very significant. Martha had stated the resurrection rather as *a doctrine, a current tenet*: Jesus states it as *a fact*, identified with His own person. He does not say, *I raise the dead*; *I perform the resurrection*, but *I am the resurrection*."⁴

Further in verse twenty-five, another phrase is presented that warrants consideration – 'Even though he were dead, yet shall he live' (ἀποθάνῃ). This seems contradictory because the two conditions cannot coexist. Understanding that this phrase speaks of an event and not a condition clears up the possible conflict. The phrase is better understood as 'though he dies, yet he shall live.'⁵ These are two subsequent events and not concurrent conditions.

General Contextual Observations

It must be noted that the commentary of the before and after details of this narrative make for a fuller appreciation of Jesus's words to the grieving. There is no clear explanation of the reason for death. This mention has little to do with the cause of death question, which in some regard is absolutely valid. Humans' minds often inquire about details of how a person died. Was it sudden? Was it tragic? Was the death the result of a sickness? What was the sickness? Did the person suffer long? And these types of questions can go on and on with no foreseeable end in sight. The truth is that death is so

⁴ Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 202–203.

⁵ Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 203.

incomprehensible to human beings that questions always surround it. Looking at the text, the only mention of Lazarus' death's precursor was sickness. Even with that small detail, there are many questions that remain. While there is no answer for any of those questions, or any other ones, in this text, a weightier truth is also present. There is no clear explanation of the reason for death.

Here's the weight of those missing details. Why did death come to the house and family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus? Why did a friend and follower of Jesus die? These questions lead to the same interrogative of many today. Why does death enter into families today? Why has Covid-19 taken so many lives?

If You Had Been Here

This statement seems to be a sting as the harshness of the sentiment reveals the deep pain of Mary. "As Mary afterwards said the same thing, in John 11:32, it is plain they had made this very natural remark to each other, perhaps many times during these four sad days, and not without having their confidence in His love at times overclouded. Such trials of faith, however, are not peculiar to them."⁶

However, there is another viewpoint. "Those words were hardly a condemnation of Jesus for not being present when Lazarus was ill. The stark reality of this fact becomes clear almost immediately. The words are those of a grieving person who desperately wished it could have been different but who has recognized that the inevitable had come

⁶ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 149.

to pass.”⁷ These words were just an introduction to the voiced expectation of Jesus doing something about the situation.

Could not Jesus have intervened and stopped this death from occurring? Even still there was the thought that the spirit hovered over the dead for seven days after death as to have the opportunity to reenter the body and cause the death to be reversed. Mary’s statement was an invitation for her Lord to act. She expressed her pain in hopes that Jesus would ease it by intervening, at her request and on Lazarus’ behalf.

Jesus Wept

Yet another observation is that Jesus shows emotion at Lazarus’ graveside and weeps. This act of crying could represent many different viewpoints. One such interpretation of Jesus Christ is that Jesus models for us an area of weakness. To give emphasis to this perception, consideration is given to the fact that Jesus waits before he comes to the town in which Lazarus was sick and eventually died. The combination of the waiting and weeping seems to identify Jesus's inability to handle the situation.

The most prevalent viewpoint is the humanistic expression shown by Jesus as he weeps. It indicates acceptable grief behavior when one loves the deceased so much they are bound to show that through expressions of grief, often displayed as crying. This essentially is permission for crying that relates to those dealing with the process of grief. It is often linked to Psalm chapter thirty where the psalmist advises that we have been permitted to endure for a night. The permission for grief along with the Christ model of such, has proven to be liberating for many who find themselves there. If Jesus cried at a

⁷ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 355.

friend's grave side, so can others. Crying is the acceptable and almost expected reaction when one grieves.

Still, there is another viewpoint of Christ's act of crying at the graveside. When surveying the faith of those who were at the graveside, especially that of the sisters who had a relationship with him, Christ cried because of their lack of faith and belief in what Christ could do even in this situation. After journeying with Jesus for years, watching all the miracles performed to this point, including that of Resurrection or resuscitation as some would call it would be the order of the day. However, that was not the case. Martha and Mary still had a difficult time dealing with death and the resultant grief and therefore was not self-reminded that Christ could handle that situation. They needed to be reminded by Christ himself. That thought could have brought Jesus to tears.

It is possible to accept even this viewpoint understanding that Christian's lack of faith is still that which grieves God. It is noted before, one of the primary purposes of the Gospel according to John is to bolster the faith of the reader. If this is so it would be appropriate for John to mention Christ weeping in the face of weak or slow growing faith. The goal of this mentioned perspective is to increase the faith of the believer as they see how Christ responds to Martha's lack of faith with words of comfort and eventual Resurrection.

The Word of Comfort

While viewing and discussing the actions of Jesus in this text such as waiting and weeping, it is the words that Christ offers that really serve as the foundational truth upon which this project stands. Jesus speaks a word of comfort to the sisters, and his words

serve as the direct influence needed to persuade the sisters in believing that God's power could handle and help in their devastating situation.

Within these eleven verses there are two distinct comments that Jesus makes. Both statements have great implications as to how a person can help to navigate others through the difficult process of grief after the death of a loved one. They also assist in setting a framework for biblical truths that should shape one's understanding of death and God's intended perspective of such. The first statement that will be deeply considered is when Jesus says to Martha, "Your brother will rise again" (Jn. 11:23, NKJV).

Before diving too deeply into the content of what Jesus said it must be noted that Jesus said something to her. The words that were spoken were seemingly meant to offer comfort. It is possible that the content of this statement could be secondary to the presentation of the statement itself. The fact that something was said out of care and concern for the one who was grieving is what could be primary here. Knowing what to say is important; secondary only to knowing when to say something. Jesus offered a word of comfort to the grieving sister that undoubtedly began to bring comfort at the beginning of this utterance. Jesus' speaking said something.

Now let's survey what was said. Jesus said, to Martha, that her brother would rise again. This introduces the concept of resurrection. Resurrection (ἀνάστασις) literally means a change for the better in status, rising up, rise.⁸ The actual word used in this text is closely aligned with resurrection.

⁸ William Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 71.

D. A. Carson says that “verse 23 is a masterpiece of planned ambiguity.”⁹ This promise, in this instance, has words with dual meaning. From a literary criticism standpoint, this fits right into the “double-level ideas” that are often found in the biblical writing of John.¹⁰ Just as John speaks of two temples in John 2:19, two births in John 3:3 and two waters in 4:10, we now see two times of resurrection in John 11:23.

There is the eventual rising of the dead that is to come and there is the immediate rising that was unique to this situation. Immediate resurrection is the term used to refer to a rising from the dead that happens within a short period from the time of the person's physical demise. This immediacy may not be same day resurrection; it is during the same episode and prior to the eventual return on the Lord Jesus, at the last day.

The fact that the latter was not an across-the-board, overarching, every instance reality, must be addressed. This is important because these particular words of Christ, regarding immediate resurrection, are words that would be desirable in every situation.

There are only five instances mentioned in the four gospels of which immediate resurrection is portrayed; the raising of Lazarus is one. The second of note is the resurrection of Jairus' daughter, recorded in Mark 5:35-43. This narrative offers details that show the daughter was raised just after this ruler went to Jesus to request his daughter's healing. As a parallel to the resurrection story of Lazarus, the immediate resurrection takes place after a plea for intervention that was prior to the death. In both cases, Jesus decides to allow the death to occur and then bring life back to the deceased. Amazement from the spectators and comfort to the bereaved family is the result. Yet,

⁹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 412.

¹⁰ Borchert, *John 1-11*, 355.

there is still a difference in the two pericopes – the timing. Jairus’ daughter seems to have been raised on the same day in which she died while Lazarus’ raising took place over four days after he died. As previously noted, this is significant because one resurrection would have more weight than the other. The young girl’s resurrection would have been expected more than that of Lazarus. Resurrection after an extended period after death was generally thought to be impossible.

Luke 17:11-17 offers the account of the widow of Nain’s son being raised from the dead and is the third resurrection in the gospel to be noted. Unlike the story of Lazarus where the names of those close to the deceased are given, this account leaves the impacted individuals unnamed. There is only mention of the fact that the mother of the dead is also a widow, and this is of importance because it indicates the compounded tragedy that her son’s death brings. This added note, which yields added grief, is similar to the added note in the narrative concerning Lazarus’ family. The added note for Mary and Martha is that Jesus loved them. Jesus had a personal relationship with them and they with him. This mutual love and heightened connectivity, while celebrated on one hand, certainly compounded the disappointment of Jesus not stopping Lazarus from dying. In both resurrection stories, the level of grief was enhanced by preceding facts that shaped the expectation of divine intervention. Moreover, those facts, added notes, served as the lenses through which they would see and handle the death of their loved one.

The most widely known account is that of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This serves as the fourth of the five noted resurrections in the gospel accounts. All four of the gospels record this important resurrection and this reality is the foundation upon which Christianity rests. This resurrection is illustrated in the gospel and is explained in many

other texts in the scriptures. Those explanations serve to endorse the truth of Christ's resurrections by emphasizing important concepts like faith and hope. In contrast to the aforementioned gospel recorded resurrections, this one has self-resurrection as its claim.

Beyond the gospels, there are two additional accounts of immediate resurrection in the New Testament. Acts 9:36–41 and Acts 20:7–12 are the accounts that record the raising of Tabitha, also called Dorcas, and Eutychus respectively. In both cases, it is the early church that led to these miracles. Further, it was two early church leaders that were used to raise the dead – Peter and Paul. This fact is enlightening simply because the other New Testament resurrection stories, in the gospels, were performed by God. Specifically, God the father and God the son. In these instances, God works through a vessel.

While these two accounts serve as inspiration and as pointing to the power of God to deal with the dead, it also places some on the position of expecting immediate resurrection in every instance. The fact that God, in the form of Jesus, did not have to be there physically and could use a selected vessel to bring about resurrection, leaves many in a space of disappointment. The question resonates, why doesn't every situation end in immediate resurrection? This is the tension that rests in this text as it relates to the interaction with those facing death and bereavement.

The reality of such immediate resurrections shows the ability of God that operates only at the will of God's sovereignty. Even still, the hope that the eventual resurrection reality brings is worthy of consideration. This is especially true against the backdrop of the early church's view on resurrection. Through the lens of historical criticism, the struggle with understanding the resurrection and the concepts that surround such was often present. Hence, Paul's discourse in First Corinthians chapter fifteen. For if they

were persuaded that there is no resurrection of bodies, he would have gradually persuaded them that neither was Christ raised.¹¹

The Second Word of Comfort

This word of comfort is more complex, and it is dual in nature. This two-dimensional focus speaks to two different realities. One reality is that of the dead; the other is the living. Both life and death realities, or better put – life in view of death and life after death, are addressed in this second emphasis. Both instances, however, have a statement of Christ’s self-proclamation as its bases. This opening phrase of Christ, which happens to have two components as well, serves as the must-be-understood preface to both realities.

The beginning of John 11: 25 records Jesus declaring that he is the resurrection and the life. This is one declaration with two parts that must be viewed collectively and separately. As “it appears that the two components, ‘I am the resurrection’ and ‘I am the life’, are successively elucidated in the two ensuing clauses.”¹² I am the resurrection. This is a separate clause that surfaces from the phrase that seems to be exclusively connected.

“I am the life. The elucidation of *I am ... the life* appears in the clause after that: *whoever lives and believes in me will never die*. The verb *lives* cannot simply mean *is*

¹¹ John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians,” in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Hubert Kestell Cornish, John Medley, and Talbot B. Chambers, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 12, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 226.

¹² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 413.

alive, as the triteness would be unbearable; obviously only those who are alive can believe!”¹³

There is yet another focus that must be seen. Christ’s comments about being ‘the life’ opens the reality that focusing on a person is more advantageous than focusing only on what a person can do. Jesus pushes the focus onto Jesus. Here’s what that means: Jesus teaches that focusing only on his ability, while that is worthwhile, is not something that can stand by itself. “Jesus’ concern is to divert Martha’s focus from an abstract belief in what takes place on the last day, to a personalized belief in him who alone can provide it.”¹⁴

Though He Were Dead

This clause reveals the truth of what Jesus being the resurrection and the life means to those that have died. Though he may die is a good translation of this clause. Despite this bad condition something else was going to happen. Though he was dead or although he died, he will live again. In this there is hope for those who would hear beyond the difficulty of the situation. This clause essentially speaks to those who are living and begins to explain how Jesus being the resurrection and the life can impact them.

¹³ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 413.

¹⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 412.

Yet Shall He Live

There is what seems like contradiction here, until clarity presents the two realities that exist at the same time. There is a difference between the physical man and the spiritual man. Here, the spiritual man, the soul, is that which shall live. “The temporary separation of soul and body is here regarded as not even interrupting, much less impairing, the new and everlasting life imparted by Jesus to His believing people.”¹⁵

Do You Believe This?

Faith in Jesus, not just in what Jesus can do, is the central concern here. If Martha’s faith can go beyond quiet confidence that her brother will be resurrected at the last day to personal trust in Jesus as the resurrection and the life, this would be a true victory. Faith in Jesus as the only person who can grant eternal life and promise the transformation of resurrection.¹⁶

Here it is seen once again that faith and belief are an essential part of John's gospel. Without this declaration of faith there was an interrogation to assess such. It is absolutely important to Believe in the personhood of Jesus; this goes beyond just believing in what he is able to do. That distinction must be made and is pressed here in this text. Yes, there is a benefit in receiving from the power filled actions of Christ, but the blessing for these grieving sisters would come from simply believing in the innate ability of The Christ. This means that even if immediate Resurrection did not happen they were being prompted to believe or have faith in the fact that it could happen.

¹⁵ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, 149.

¹⁶ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 414.

Jesus asks the question if Martha believes or not. The question asks plainly if Martha believes what was just spoken or taught. The information offered about Jesus being the resurrection and the life and the fact that those who believed in him could have everlasting life as if they had never died is what is at question here. The question is not about the truth of Christ's statements, it is about the reception of that truth. Without a doubt there is no question concerning the fact that Jesus is all that he claimed in His Word of comfort to this sister. The same is true for all who read this text today. The truth is that Jesus is the resurrection. The truth is that Jesus is the life. The only question lies in whether that truth is received and accepted by those who have encountered this fact.

She answered in the affirmative her faith is a rich mixture of personal trust (*fiducia*) and of confidence that certain things about Jesus are true (*assensus*), viz. that he is the Christ (*cf.* notes on 1:41), that He is the Son of God (*cf.* notes on 1:49), and that He is the one who was to come into the world (*cf.* notes on 1:9; 6:14).¹⁷

Conclusion

In summary, Jesus speaks in a comforting way to the sisters of Lazarus that addresses both the physical and spiritual state. Newman and Nida suggest that “the double use of death in verses twenty-five through twenty-six is to be found also in Jn. 6:49–50; in verse forty-nine death is physical, but in verse fifty it is spiritual. It seems best therefore to suggest that the death in verse twenty-five is physical, while death in verse twenty-six is spiritual, and life in verses twenty-five through twenty-six is

¹⁷ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 414.

spiritual.”¹⁸ The references to life in verse twenty-five and twenty-six model the same. Life in verse twenty-five is physical and life in verse twenty-six is spiritual. Both states must be addressed when seeking to comfort those dealing with death, dying, and grief. This is the overall message that Jesus’s words of comfort reveal, the believer who dies physically will one day live again and “the believer who is spiritually alive will never die spiritually.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Barclay Moon Newman and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, UBS Handbook Series (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1993), 367.

¹⁹ Newman and Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, 367.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

This chapter will look at the historical figure St. John Chrysostom. Understanding how important the proclamation of the word of God is to those that are grieving, Saint John Chrysostom is a great model of such impact. This early church influencer used his mastery of oral presentation to help make a mark on the doctrine of the church and the understanding of the same. With a unique style, Chrysostom spoke to the listener to offer clearer explanations of difficult concepts than many of his counterparts. He was known as the golden-mouth preacher. As an important take-away, this historical study showed the power of the preached word.

St. John Chrysostom was an Archbishop of Constantinople who lived in the fourth century AD. St. John Chrysostom was a priest, deacon, and then Doctor of the Church who lived to the age of sixty, from 347 to 407 Common Era. His popularity and impact on the church remains to this day even though there is little press and infrequent mention of his name. Though he is not as famed as some of the early church fathers, his theological insights and sermon presentations have shaped the catechism material used by many, especially those of the Catholic Church.

One of the common threads that surface from a study of the life and work of St. John Chrysostom's theme of supporting those that seemed to be overlooked and dealing with difficult situations. Certainly, those facing death, dying, and grief fall into this

category. Dealing with those in need, by way of addressing their needs within sermonic presentation, was a key focus for Chrysostom; that thread is one seen throughout all his writings and homilies.

Beyond Chrysostom's written and spoken sermons, and likely the foundation for the same, was his generally good character. He is often spoken of in a positive light. One such case is with the nineteenth century theologian, John Henry Newman. He described John Chrysostom as a "bright, cheerful, gentle soul; a sensitive heart."¹ This assessment, along with the many others, no doubt serves as the catalyst of the impactful theology writing and preaching espoused by Chrysostom.

St. John Chrysostom left a tremendous mark on the Christian church. His worship materials are used in celebratory gatherings by Eastern Orthodox Christians almost weekly; his short sermons are classified by many as the best ever offered. As with most major contributors to the work of the church, there will always be those that work against the efforts of the preacher. This is especially true as it relates to political leaders when the content of the presented sermons threatens their power and position. Because of this, Chrysostom was banished from the city once by the empress. Then a second time the empress had him removed and forcibly walked to a remote location. St. John did not survive the journey and died on Sept. 17, 407.

In the next several sections, there will be an intentional look at the life of Chrysostom, from his upbringing to his career and ministry assignments. Attention will also be given to the work that he has accomplished through his written and oral presentations and their influence on the mindsets and ministry work of the church.

¹ John Cardinal Newman, "St. Chrysostom," *The Newman Reader*, Rambler: 1859.

Early Life

St. John Chrysostom was born in Antioch in the year 347 AD. Antioch was one of the major cities of the Roman Empire. Chrysostom parents were wholesome people even though there is debate as to whether they were religious. It is interesting that some of the foundational goodness that many possess come from a moral base as opposed to a spiritual base, as some would consider. Possibly, there is a fusion between what is typically considered religious and secular. The foundation that Chrysostom received from his parents helped to shape the eventual force he would become.²

St. John Chrysostom's father died soon after his birth and he was raised by his mother. As aforementioned there has been debate as to how religious his mother was during his early years. Some believe that she was minimally spiritually aware, while others suggested that she was deeply pious. What is clear however is that Chrysostom's mother's impact on her son, as the sole influencer, was exactly what Chrysostom needed to have the internal substance necessary to grow into a major church contributor.³

Edmund Venables offers this commentary about Chrysostom's family and his mother specifically:

His mother, Anthusa, was also a lady of good family (Pallad. p. 40; Socr. vi. 3). Secundus died while his son was yet an infant. Anthusa was left a widow at the age of twenty, but she steadily refused all offers of marriage, and devoted herself to watching over the education of her boy, and the care of the property which was to be his (*De Sacerdot.* lib. i. c. 55). Anthusa was no common woman. She was a Christian from the bottom of her heart, and her chief object was to train her son to God's service, and to keep him unspotted by the contaminations of the luxurious

² W. R. W. Stephens, *Saint John Chrysostom, His Life and Times: A Sketch of the Church and the Empire in the Fourth Century* (Sonoma, CA: Good Press, 2022), 425, Kindle.

³ Edmund Venables, "John Chrysostom," in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines*, ed. William Smith and Henry Wace (London, UK: John Murray, 1887), 518.

and profligate city of Antioch. Anthusa's unremitting devotion to her maternal duties excited universal admiration. Her son himself informs us that when he began to attend the lectures of one of the Antiochene professors, probably Libanius, who was still a heathen, his master on learning that he was the son of a widow forty years of age, who twenty years before had lost her husband while still in the flower of her youth, and had remained unmarried, exclaimed "Good heavens! what women these Christians have" (*Epist. ad Vid. Jun.* i. c. 2, p. 340). The church owes no common debt of reverential gratitude to the memory of Anthusa, who deserves to be placed in the very first rank of Christian mothers, with Monica the mother of St. Augustine, Nonna the mother of St. Gregory Nazianzen, and Osburh the mother of king Alfred.⁴

Early Career

St. John Chrysostom studied in his birthplace, Antioch, under one of the most famous teachers of grammar and rhetoric. Libanius, the well-known Greek professor was known for his teaching in the Sophist school. Rhetoric, including the mastery of language as well as oral presentation, was the essential component of Chrysostom's career and ministry work and this particular matriculation under Libanius' tutelage was invaluable.⁵

This teacher deposited great lessons on the life of Chrysostom and helped to shape his career in the practice of law and later as a preacher. It is very interesting to note that even with the rise of Christian supremacy in the later Roman Empire, Libanius did not convert to Christianity. In fact, he did not deal much with religious matters as he was a pagan.

Chrysostom's studies lead him to become a lawyer and he practiced law as a young man. He later claimed that this career had been forced upon him by his parents. Either way, he had great success in that advocacy work. His career as a lawyer certainly

⁴ Venables, "John Chrysostom," 518.

⁵ Venables, "John Chrysostom," 518.

aided him in persuasive speech. Preparing to present before magistrates and judges of all sorts made Chrysostom ready to look at all angles of that which was being presented to ensure his point would always be made. The use of rhetoric was very important for this lawyer who became a preacher. Ethos, pathos, and logos were all evident in the skills he perfected as a lawyer and used readily in the sermons presented while a preacher.⁶

Church Work

At some point while raising St. John Chrysostom, his mother connected to the church in a more substantial way. Under his mother's influence, St. John also became devout. He then began studying the scripture under the guidance of the Bishop of Antioch and was later baptized.

From St. John Chrysostom's time of study and his desire to fully please God, he was drawn to become a monk. A life of study and solitude was his desire. In that, he thought that this would please God; that is what he wanted most. In fact, when his mother passed, he withdrew to the wilderness for a season of solitude, study, and reflection. While there he wrote several works on the penitent life.

Even during this season of intense writing, Chrysostom was able to hone the skills of persuasion even though it was in written form as opposed to oral presentation. Hearing directly from God and then being inspired to write such that years later people would be convinced of particular theological and spiritual truths, was his aim. Many would say that he accomplished that.

⁶ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 345.

After several years, he went to a cave to live in complete silence. As one of the disciplines that help to deepen the penitent life and to advance the goal of oneness with the Lord, this type of silence is often accompanied with fasting and prayer. He lasted for two years until his health declined and he was forced to come back into the common society.

Chrysostom was ordained as a priest in 386 and began preaching and sharing that which was the benefit from his devout studying of the scriptures and the deposits that he received from his time in the wilderness. He eventually earned the name, 'Chrysostom' (Golden Mouthed) for his brilliant sermons. He was known for his love of scripture, and many of his sermons were compiled into commentaries. This tag on his life, golden mouth, was one that described his passion for preaching and his effectiveness at the same. His preaching allowed for explanation of theological concepts that surfaced from scripture and were relevant to those in which he was preaching to. He stood with a level of boldness and conviction. Those two combined aided in the solidification of his renowned status as a preacher.

Almost in the fashion of a modern-day preacher and high demand, people during Chrysostom's day were eager to hear him preach. The finely crafted messages and the insight in which he offered seem to be attractive to those who listened. Added to that skill set was the ability to present in such a way that drew in those who heard him preach. When people received the word from Chrysostom, it was as if they were receiving something as precious as gold, firmly establishing the title The Golden mouthed preacher.

Elevation to Bishop was the next step for St. John Chrysostom. In 397, he was chosen to be the Bishop of Constantinople, which was perhaps the most important

Christian office of its day. Although an extremely busy position, he nevertheless continued his literary output in the form of sermons, which he preached in the great church. There were times when his sermons did not sit well with the royal court because of their passion and content.

Powerful Preacher

Saint John Chrysostom is one of the most famous preachers in history and one of the greatest orators of the Christian Church. As a preacher, Saint Chrysostom was renowned for his powerful sermons that were filled with passion and eloquence. He was particularly known for his emphasis on repentance and piety, as well as his clear explanation of difficult theological concepts.

Chrysostom's years of preaching started as a result of the work he did while being a deacon. "During his five years' diaconate he had gained great popularity by his aptness to teach, and the elevating influence of his intercourse and conversation had made itself widely felt at Antioch."⁷ He was then ordained to the presbyterate in the early part of 386 AD.⁸

After his ordination he preached his first sermon in the presence of the bishop, and a vast crowd gathered by the general report of his eloquence. The sermon, like most first sermons, is a somewhat formal and laboured discourse, encumbered by rhetorical ornament, and characterised by more of self-depreciation, and extravagant laudation of Flavian and Meletius than would please now. The succeeding ten years, embracing Chrysostom's life as a presbyter at Antioch, were chiefly devoted to the cultivation of the gift of pulpit eloquence on which his celebrity mainly rests. It was during this period that "the great clerk and godly preacher," as our First Homily terms him, delivered the greater part of the discourses extant, which however must be but a very small portion of those actually preached. Their number must have been enormous, for he preached

⁷ Venables, "John Chrysostom," 520.

⁸ Venables, "John Chrysostom," 520.

regularly twice a week, on Saturday and Sunday, besides Lent and saints' days. We learn from his homilies on Genesis that he sometimes occupied the pulpit five days in succession.⁹

One unique aspect of Saint Chrysostom's preaching style was his frequent use of figurative language to bring spiritual truths alive to his congregation. His vivid imagery and metaphors made even abstract topics easier to understand for lay people. His sermons were often lively affairs filled with emotion, humor, and much inspiration from scripture. One example of his skillful preaching can be found in the Homilies on Galatians, where he calls us to action: "Let us not merely be Christians by name; let us show ourselves such by our actions..."¹⁰

Chrysostom's preaching continued to draw crowds to hear him throughout his ministry. It should be noted that "though his sermons (which lasted between 30 minutes and two hours) were well attended, he sometimes became discouraged: "My work is like that of a man who is trying to clean a piece of ground into which a muddy stream is constantly flowing."¹¹ At the same time, he said, "Preaching improves me. When I begin to speak, weariness disappears; when I begin to teach, fatigue too disappears."¹²

St. John Chrysostom's sermons have lost little of their power in the centuries since they were first introduced . Robert Van de Weyer notes that "His plain, blunt

⁹ Venables, "John Chrysostom," 520-521.

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, "On Galatians 6."

¹¹ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, "Introduction," *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000), 84-85.

¹² Galli and Olsen, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*, 84-85.

language, and the simple homely images he used to illustrate his message still compel our attention.”¹³

He was a noted and prolific preacher, who delivered his words with confidence and conviction with a boldness of the truth that sometimes-made others uncomfortable. Despite this fact that it lived up to his intention, as conviction is never comfortable, the elite who stood offended by the challenge of truth used their power to set forth steps to ban and place Chrysostom into exile. They did this all for his voice of truth.

Being known as the ‘golden mouthed preacher came from his fame that spread throughout all Syria. The people that gave him that name witnessed his exceptional oration skills even from his childhood. Chrysostom was quoted to have said "Preaching improves me. When I begin to speak, weariness disappears; when I begin to teach, fatigue too disappears."¹⁴ He spoke to the self-improvement through his delivery of the Word, and as a preacher he was a vessel for the improvement of others.

Lead to Death

The season that led up to his death was tumultuous as he found himself in the mountains clinging for survival and absent of the resources needed for strength. Despite this condition, his soul was steadfast to his calling and in the same spirit of imprisoned Paul, wrote and extended his wisdom and revelation to the people he cared about and led. The distance did not block their listening as they gleaned wisdom from this sage man

¹³ Robert Van de Weyer, "On Living Simply: The Golden Voice of John Chrysostom," Amazon, <https://a.co/12YqF10>.

¹⁴ Mary Fairchild, "John Chrysostom: Greatest Preacher of the Early Church," Learn Religions, <https://www.learnreligions.com/john-chrysostom>.

of God. This influence unsettled the same elite who thought his exile would diminish his influence. This led to a further journey of exile with their hopes of increasing the distance and decreasing his power. This journey took more than a toll on him and five miles beyond Camona in Pontus (now in Turkey) he spent his last night alive in a church dedicated to another martyr, Bishop Basiliscus.

Waking up beyond weak, they began a journey to continue to move him on but saw his frailty. It is recorded that upon return to the church he asked for a white robe, which was given him. He gave away his old clothes and surrounded by monks and nuns, raised himself up, saying, "Glory be to God for all things. Amen."¹⁵ Those were his last words. He died on this day, September 14, 407. This was the rest he wrote about, his deliverance from his exhausting labor.

Canonization

After Chrysostom's death, he was suggested as a candidate for Canonization – the declaration of a deceased person to be officially recognized as a saint. This level of reverence and respect was only set aside for those that have made such an invaluable impact on the church that the person should not be forgotten.

The process of canonization begins with the position of 'Servant of God', which is conferred upon someone who shows exceptional qualities that may qualify them for sainthood. After further investigation by theologians, historians, and other experts (which can take many years), if it is determined that the candidate deserves sainthood, then they

¹⁵ Dan Graves, "John Chrysostom Died on Forced March," Christianity, <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/301-600/john-chrysostom-died-on-forced-march-11629690.html>.

are given the title 'Venerable'. From here, two miracles must be attributed to their intercession before they can become blessed. Finally, after another demonstration of holiness by official decree from a Pope or council, the person can be declared a Saint.

The purpose behind declaring someone as a saint lies in acknowledging their virtuous deeds and passing on these examples so others may imitate them, thus helping keep moral standards within society high while also inspiring individuals to strive towards perfection in how they live out their religion. Through canonization we recognize those who have already achieved it while also providing guidance for any believers looking for ways to better themselves spiritually. Additionally, being declared a saint also serves as confirmation that prayerful dedication does pay off; becoming recognized by God even after death is possible if you are devoted enough during your lifetime.

As archbishop of Constantinople from 434–446, Saint Proclus preached sermons highlighting Chrysostom, his predecessor in the Church of Hagia Sophia. His hope was to bring about the reconciliation of the contemporaries and followers of St. John Chrysostom.

These homilies helped to push forward the canonization of St. John Chrysostom. It took the advancement in public opinion for the patriarch to receive permission from the emperor to return Chrysostom's relics to Constantinople. This was granted and they were hallowed in the Church of the Holy Apostles on January 28, 438. The Eastern Orthodox Church even commemorates Chrysostom as a Great Ecumenical Teacher along with Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian. These three saints, in addition to having

their own individual commemorations throughout the year, are commemorated together on January 30th at the synaxis feast of the Three Hierarchs.¹⁶

In recognition of Saint John Chrysostom's impact on Christianity, he was recognized by Pope Innocent III in 1204 and officially declared a "Doctor of the Church" in 1568 by Pope Pius V. To this day, he remains one of the most influential preachers ever known and a beloved author whose works continue to inspire readers everywhere.¹⁷

St. John Chrysostom's Contemporaries

St. John Chrysostom lived during the fourth century AD, a period of great upheaval for the Roman world. He was part of a circle of influential Christian theologians and friends who were instrumental in shaping early Christianity. Some of his contemporaries included Gregory Nazianzen, Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan, and Jerome.

Gregory Nazianzen was a prominent member of the Cappadocian Fathers, and he is known for writing many theological works that are still important today. His most famous work is "On God's Nature" which discusses Trinitarian Theology and its implications on faith. He also wrote several poems such as "The Oration on Easter" which gives thanks to Jesus Christ for His Resurrection.¹⁸

Basil of Caesarea was a theologian and one of the Cappadocian Fathers. He wrote several important works, such as "On the Holy Spirit" which focuses on the study of the

¹⁶ Galli and Olsen, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*, 85.

¹⁷ Venables, "John Chrysostom," 518.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, *The Complete Works of St. John Chrysostom: Cross-linked to the Bible with Linked Footnotes* (Omaha, NE: Patristic Publishing, 2019), 652, Kindle.

Trinity. He also was known for his unorthodox views on Trinitarian Theology, which caused some controversy within Christian circles.¹⁹

Ambrose of Milan was an influential bishop and is known for writing several theological works including “On Faith and Creation” which discussed free will and predestination. He is also credited with creating liturgical music that is still used in churches to this day. Finally, Jerome was a theologian, scholar, and translator who translated the Bible into Latin from Greek manuscripts. His translation is known as the Vulgate and is still used today. He was also an important member of St. John Chrysostom's circle, providing him with spiritual guidance and friendship.

These four men were all contemporaries of St. John Chrysostom and had a great influence on his work, thought, and faith. They are remembered for their significant contributions to early Christian theology and scholarship that continues to shape Christianity today.

The theological works of these four theologians are some of the most important texts within Christianity. Their writings helped shape the beliefs and practices that Christians follow today such as Trinitarian Theology, liturgical music, free will versus predestination, Bible translation into Latin from Greek manuscripts, just to name a few. It is safe to say that without the works of these four theologians, Christian theology would look very different today.

St. John Chrysostom and his contemporaries provided a foundation for early Christianity and helped shape beliefs and traditions that have been passed down through

¹⁹ Chrysostom, *The Complete Works of St. John Chrysostom*, 47, Kindle.

generations. The influence of these four men has left an indelible mark on the history of Christianity and their work still resonates in modern churches today.

Survey of Chrysostom's Sermons

Here, we will look at some of the main threads that run through the many sermons that St. John Chrysostom produced through his ministry. Without a doubt, there are sufficient well organized and powerfully presented sermons from which to survey. The leaders of the Church of Antioch were “so well satisfied with his sermons that he at once opened the cathedral pulpit to him and appointed him one of the most frequent preachers there. Whenever he preached the church was densely thronged, the hearers testifying their delight in loud and noisy applause.”²⁰ This is a testament to the powerful sermons that Chrysostom wrote and delivered.

As one looks back on his masterful words, it can be seen that his nomenclature of the golden mouth is fitting as his words had priceless value. These words, contained in the fullness of his sermons, certainly offered a type of spiritual benefit to the masses that is not easily erased. One reason for the indelible mark that Chrysostom left is the focus that he always had on others and their benefit. Unlike many of the other leaders of that day, Chrysostom always looked out for the least among them and appealed to those in power to always assist as they were able. In one of his sermons, he pushed those who desire to be religious to extend their devotion to God to express help and benevolence to others. He packaged his point like this: “Prayer without almsgiving is unfruitful.”²¹ This

²⁰ Venables, “John Chrysostom,” 521.

²¹ Thomas Hopko, “Thirty-Two - When You Give Alms,” *The Lenten Spring* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983), 128–129.

statement is really a call to action; this thought has the potential to ground the life that desires to live out the church's complete mandate.

While Chrysostom's sermons spend a great majority of time focusing on how to live in right relationship to God and God's creation, he also took time to visit the topic of death. Surveying his mentioning of this topic offers additional emphasis as to why St. John Chrysostom is the historical figure worth examining for this area of study. In one of his excerpts on death, it states:

Death is rest; a deliverance from the exhausting labors and cares of this world. When, then, thou seest a relative departing, yield not to despondency; give thyself to reflection; examine thy conscience; cherish the thought that after a little while this end awaits thee also. Be more considerate; let another's death excite thee to salutary fear; shake off all indolence; examine your past deeds; quit your sins, and commence a happy change.

We differ from unbelievers in our estimate of things. The unbeliever surveys the heavens and worships it because he thinks it a divinity; he looks to the earth and makes himself a servant to it, and longs for the things of sense. But not so with us. We survey the Heaven, and admire Him that made it; for we believe it not to be a god, but a work of God. I look on the whole creation and am led by it to the Creator. He looks on wealth and longs for it with earnest desire; I look on wealth and condemn it. He sees poverty and laments; I see poverty and rejoice. I see things in one light; he in another.

Just so in regard to death. He sees a corpse and thinks of it as a corpse; I see a corpse and behold sleep rather than death. And as in regard to books, both learned persons and unlearned see them with the same eyes, but not with the same understanding—for to the unlearned the mere shapes of letters appear, while the learned discover the sense that lies within those letters; so in respect to affairs in general, we all see what takes place with the same eyes, but not with the same understanding and judgment. Since, therefore, in all other things we differ from them, shall we agree with them in our sentiments respecting death?

Consider to whom the departed has gone and take comfort. He has gone where Paul is, and Peter; and the whole company of the saints. Consider how he shall arise, and with what glory and splendor!²²

²² John Chrysostom, "The Blessings of Death," *The World's Famous Orations*, Continental Europe (380–1906), c.347–407.

Chrysostom opens this sermon with the assertion of death being considered rest. In fact, death in this instance is referred to as deliverance from the woes of life. Often life is considered the gift and death is looked at as the curse. Life is normally mentioned in many fictions as the positive and the death is all negative. This thought supports the scriptural truth that is sometimes overlooked or at best, only infrequently mentioned. Chrysostom's statement about this is historically important because he was facing the long-standing thought that death was punishment only. His assertions go against the understanding that death is solely the result of sin entering the world. To this day, this is still a debate. Chrysostom's bold addressing of this marks the importance of his role in the doctrinal conversations of the church. This sermon excerpt closes with the discussion surrounding heaven and the reunion, of sorts, that will take place. Anticipating the eventual connection with some of the biblical giants of the faith is the way that he suggests we view death.

In another of his most famous sermons, Paschal Homily, St. John Chrysostom surveys theological concepts that had further impact on the church. To this day, many of the assertions offered in his preaching of this sermon still serve as means of shaping the continually framework of the church's thought surrounding Christ and Christ's work in and for His church. To start, the Easter season in Eastern Orthodox and Byzantine Catholic churches there is a service called Paschal matins, in which this sermon is repeated and reviewed.²³

Here, Chrysostom even mentions death. Several times he talks about entering into the joy of the Lord. This line could certainly have dual meaning. One has to do with

²³ Stephens, *Saint John Chrysostom*, 275, Kindle.

beginning a relationship with the Lord. In a sense this is entering into the Lord's joyous presence and care. The idea of being in relationship with the Lord is a recurring theme.

Another reference to death, dying, and grieving, and perhaps in a more direct way, is the statement in which Chrysostom admonishes the recipient of the message to view death in light of the work of Christ. "Let no one fear death, for the death of our Savior has set us free. He has destroyed it by enduring it."²⁴ This foundational principle gives the perspective of hope in the face of death that only Christ brings. Chrysostom's Christ centered point of view is presented to listener:

Christ is risen, and you, O death, are annihilated! Christ is risen, and the evil ones are cast down! Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice! Christ is risen, and life is liberated! Christ is risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead; for Christ, having risen from the dead, is to become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. To Him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen!²⁵

These excerpts from the sermons of Saint John Chrysostom bring fourth-century wisdom to twentieth century issues. Each serves as a brief introduction to a major spiritual thinker and makes it ideal as a meditation book for daily use. Another sermon that highlighted death is consumed with the tension between grief and glory, separation, and divine union. Here is what Chrysostom preached:

I shall soon be far away from those I love. I shall soon be cut off from the brothers and sisters whom God has given me. I shall be driven by evil men from the place where God has called me to live and work. I confess that I am sad. I may even say that I am bitter. I will add that I am angry. But I do not despair. On the contrary I feel hope. The source of my hope is the knowledge that, though I shall be separated from my brothers and sisters in body, I shall not be separated in spirit. The proof of this is in Christ. The first apostles knew him in body; and when he was crucified, they feared that they would be separated from him forever. But as he himself had prophesied, the bodily separation brought them

²⁴ John Chrysostom, "The Paschal Homily of Saint John Chrysostom," Living Orthodox Faith, <http://livingorthodoxfaith.blogspot.com/2010/01/paschal-homily-of-st-john-chrysostom.html>.

²⁵ Chrysostom, "The Paschal Homily of Saint John Chrysostom," <http://livingorthodoxfaith.blogspot.com/2010/01/paschal-homily-of-st-john-chrysostom.html>.

even closer in spirit. After his death they knew him in the very depth of their hearts. Equally, when I am separated in body from my brothers and sisters, I shall know them even more deeply than I know them at present. In this knowledge my sadness will melt away, my bitter emotions will grow sweet again, and my anger will be soothed. Nothing can destroy love which is rooted and founded in Christ.²⁶

Life after death is also something that Chrysostom spoke of in his sermons. There is a place of total fulfillment that awaits Christians in that life that is to come. In the aforementioned sermon, Chrysostom speaks of the difficulty that death brings as it relates to that which will be missed because of it. Separation from the people and things of life that bring enjoyment will be missed. In fact, there will be grief because of the separation. It is only a focus on the benefit that results from a rooted focus on Christ, that offers a sense of solace.

Conclusion

One additional sermon thought that Chrysostom offered serves as a summation of both his life and his theological impact on the church. He speaks of death not as the finale, but as the transport to that which lies beyond death. In that sense, death is not to be feared even in the reality of the grief of which it presents. Here are the summative words found within the sermonic voice and thought of Saint John Chrysostom. “Do I fear death? No, because on the rock of faith I know that death is the gateway to eternal life.”²⁷

This truth sums up the life and ministry of Chrysostom. He did not fear death and he had the goal of eternal life. All that was evident in the way he persuasively preached and declared God's word to those that would listen. This historical figure is a great model

²⁶ Van de Weyer, “On Living Simply,” <https://a.co/12YqF10>.

²⁷ Van de Weyer, “On Living Simply,” <https://a.co/12YqF10>.

for any proclaimer of God's word that desires to do so with effectiveness. Being convinced of the inevitability of death and the hope of eternal life offers every preacher a foundation to share that wonderful truth with provisioners. Believing the truth as the preacher makes the preaching more powerful for those who are to receive it. Saint John Chrysostom is that model for the preacher who was there to embrace preaching systematically on death, dying, and grief.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Process Theology makes holy the space and place of ‘right now’ as the reality that God honors. In fact, God’s presence in every reality is a foundational truth to this theological thought. This must serve as a source of comfort for the grieving. First, their place of grieving, which is their reality, is an acceptable place to be. Therefore, ‘getting over it’ or ‘moving on’ is not the goal for those that grieve. Further, comfort shows up in the truth as we see God respond to the individual and their process, wherever they may be in their process. The theological theory calls this as God being in process and God changing to fit the need of the situation.

Certainly, the discussion of God’s sovereignty and the question of theodicy surfaces as Process Theology relates to death and grief. The understanding of how to handle the death of a loved one and how the grieving process works as just that, a process, is really a theological matter that needs to be addressed. In this chapter, these concepts will be explored.

There are many theological concepts that undergird the faith and foundation of the church and those who are a part of the church. Without a doubt, these thoughts and concepts serve as a basis for a more complete understanding of life, its status, and

progression. To that end, process theology asserts that “all reality is in process, a dynamic and creative process of becoming.”¹

Process theology generically embraces the thought that God, the understanding of God and embracing the ways of God is an ever-evolving process. This quest never ends. As the name of this theological concept states, process, development, and progression is the core of this theology. The church is in process. Even God, in some sorts, is in process. This “reality is a process of becoming, not a static universe of objects or substances.”²

It is important to note that the greatest point of tension is this view of God. There is a question about the sovereignty of God and God’s superiority. “Unlike other radical movements, process theology is theistic, but its concept of God emphasizes His relationships with creation, His capacity to ‘surpass’ Himself (but in respect of other entities to remain ‘unsurpassable’), His ‘bi-polar’ nature, and His root attribute as love rather than uncreatedness.”³ Since this theology focus is God-centered at its core, attention will be given to the role that God plays in the relation to creation. Process theology clearly affirms much that traditional Christianity welcomes, notably the empathy of God for the world and the desire of God to work through creaturely freedom rather than iron laws and sheer power.⁴

¹ Douglas Mangum, *The Lexham Glossary of Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), Logos Software.

² T. Bradshaw, “Process Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 707.

³ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1341.

⁴ Bradshaw, “Process Theology,” 708.

Process Theology's Beginning

Process theology began as a system of thought. Pertains came from ideas and principles, involved in Christian religions. It was developed by Charles Hartshorne, who published more than thirty books, especially on this topic. He shared his thoughts together with like-minded people such as Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947). The foundation was laid for this theological movement at least two decades before their breakthrough in the twentieth century. Process philosophy is where the theology originally started.⁵

Process philosophy needs to be distinguished from Process Theology because the two are not entirely identical even though they usually go hand in hand. The former is meant to explain how time, space, and causation have existed for all eternity while the latter offers theories on God being part of the universe rather than apart from it and why he would choose to interact with humans through Christ if he has always been involved with everyone.⁶ Whitehead's theory states that God cannot be described using human logic and should therefore not be treated as a person at all.⁷ Hartshorne used everyday language when talking about him and still claimed his existence could be verified by empirical evidence such as natural processes occurring without divine intervention.⁸

There are factions of this theological stance that goes further than the process that individuals go through. It supposes that God also changes. This thought has stopped many in their tracks simply because it seems to go directly against the understanding of

⁵ David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology* (Anoka, MN: Process Century Press, 2017), 1.

⁶ Griffin, *Process Theology*, 2-4.

⁷ Griffin, *Process Theology*, 1.

⁸ Griffin, *Process Theology*, 2.

God to be a constant. The thought of God changing in any way is problematic for most. Those who reconcile these concepts understand that God being infinite is revealed to be finite in a way that can only be presented as a process. So, the thought of God changing is understood to say that the way we can grasp who God is and what God does is ever evolving because we progressively get to see those attributes in a way leading to full and complete disclosure. God is always in the process of showing God's self to his people; it is continual progression.

Process Theology's focus on divine action and the human response has made it attractive to scholars outside philosophy and religious studies. They have found its ideas to be very useful for other disciplines such as economics, psychology, and biology. This is especially true because of their ability to generate new ways of looking at problems that would otherwise remain unnoticed or ignored completely.

Process Theology sees God as the source of all change, not as an external observer who already has everything under control. It is about becoming, not being. Thus, there is no absolute beginning or end because God is not only present in the past and present but also for the future. This implies that one can never say to God: 'You did this', 'It was your idea'. Process Theology sees reality as evolving. Reality itself develops through time and space. Therefore, it would be true to talk about a new world every moment, but that does not mean that nothing will ever happen again.

Process Theology's Thought Leaders

The early developmental ideas of Process Theology were developed by Charles Hartshorne (1897 -2000) and were later expounded upon by John B. Cobb and David Ray

Griffin. Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000) was an author and philosopher who wrote extensively on Process Theology and metaphysics. His major works include *The Logic of Perfection*, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*, and *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*.⁹ He studied at Harvard University, the University of Chicago, the University of Gottingen, and the University of Freiburg.¹⁰

Hartshorne is best known for developing a process philosophy based on Alfred North Whitehead's work, which emphasized human experience as a part of God's ongoing creative process. He argued that reality is not static but ever-changing as it relates to God's presence. His philosophical system was also based on the idea that truth can be found in religious experience, and he sought to combine traditional theological thought with modern scientific theories. This approach has been influential in contemporary theology, especially among those who adhere to a view of panentheism. Hartshorne also wrote extensively on aesthetics, including his book *Beauty as Presence: Aesthetics in Lonergan's Thought* (1995). In it he explored how beauty can lead to deeper understanding and spiritual growth.

John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, two contemporary theologians heavily influenced by Hartshorne's process philosophy, have written extensively about God's ongoing creative process. Griffin's most successful work is *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, which provides an overview of Hartshorne's theological ideas in a way accessible to all readers.¹¹

⁹ Norman L. Geisler and William D. Watkins, "Process Theology: A Survey and an Appraisal," *Themelios* 12, no. 1 (1986): 17.

¹⁰ Bradshaw, "Process Theology," 707.

¹¹ John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976), 7-9.

These two were prominent theological and philosophical thought leaders especially in the area of process. In Cobb's 1965 book, *A Christian Natural Theology*, he discusses the influence of assurance work on his own understanding of theology. Along with Griffin, Cobb was a major figure in the development of Process Theology beyond the initial thought of life as a harsh one. They draw on the philosophies of Alfred North Whitehead as well. They have written widely on religious faith and philosophical thought including numerous books about the relationship between God and reality. One of Cobb's later works examined human injustice and environmental degradation particularly in relation to Global climate change.¹²

God, Power and Evil: A Process Theology was written in 2004 by David Ray Griffin. He argued that it is possible to reconcile traditional religious benefits with modern scientific knowledge by looking at the interaction between God and nature from a process perspective.

Some Main Concepts of Process Theology

Process Theology is not dogmatic, because it does not tell us what to believe. It puts emphasis on values such as love, justice, and wisdom all while including God's presence in every aspect of reality. The overarching adherence to these principal values should make Process Theology worthy of consideration from all Christians. God's love is the model of which all persons should emulate. Because of this, the preceding concepts are understood, or at least attempted to be understood, with that in mind.

¹² Bradshaw, "Process Theology," 707.

One of the themes of Process Theology is the thought that reality is not made up of material substances that endure through time, but serially ordered events, which are experiential in nature.¹³ In the sense of reality, it is assumed that what is real is inflexible and preset. Process Theology asserts that situations, conditions, and circumstances change in progressive ways as the sovereign need arises. Everything changes. Everything grows, matures, and morphs into what is necessary at the time. So essentially, the reality that is seen in a moment is not exactly what it was just moments before and may not be the reality of what is to come even moments after. Consider the phrase ‘ever evolving’ as the framework for this Process Theology theme.

Since God contains a changing universe, God is changeable. That is to say, God is affected by the actions that take place in the universe over the course of time. However, the abstract elements of God like goodness and wisdom remain eternally solid. It is the expressed attributes and actions of God that are consistent with the circumstances of life that are ever changing. As life changes God does also. God's consistent kindness is what stays the same. Looking at this theological concept reveals the complexity of God. Still, it shows the simplicity of this truth, God is exactly what God's people need. Consistent love and kindness expressed through varying presentations of God's self.

Process Theology and God's Sovereignty

In order to embrace this thought, there must be a departure from the normal way we look at God being all powerful. Once people get past the shock of this statement, we can be embraced for the intent behind that statement. For instance, if there were a sense

¹³ Philip A. Pecorino, “Philosophy of Religion,” *Process Theology and Philosophy* (New York, NY: Queensborough Community College, 2001), 1.

of an area where God was not completely in control as it relates to his use of power this would be one. The idea of Omni-restraint must be considered. The view of God in this system is of a God with two poles: a transcendent, eternal pole and an imminent, experiential pole that is embedded in reality's process of becoming.¹⁴ This view looks at God more focused on experience rather than theory.

There are some areas of controversy as it relates to Process Theology's view of God's sovereignty in the thought that God's foreknowledge is limited, because of the limitations he has placed upon himself in giving humans free will.¹⁵ There are more critics of this line of thinking. Yuille Stephen's comments on open theism, a close train of thought to Process Theology, seem to sum up the greatest critic of God's sovereignty as it is also seen in Process Theology. "In short, God is not absolutely sovereign; he is not immutable; he is not infinite in power and knowledge. On the contrary, he is limited. Among other things, this means God does not know the future, but reacts as events unfold. For open theists, this paradigm provides a more plausible explanation for the relationship between God and human suffering and, therefore, greater comfort in the midst of suffering."¹⁶

Ultimately, the question of the sovereignty of God rests on the foreknowledge and omnipotence of God. Process Theology says that God does not know all our decisions before they happen, only those choices that have been made already. This does not mean that God is not all-knowing, it only means that he/she/it is not stuck in time. According to

¹⁴ Mangum, *The Lexham Glossary of Theology*, Logos Software.

¹⁵ C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 85–86.

¹⁶ Stephen Yuille, "How Pastoral Is Open Theism?," *Themelios* 32, no. 2 (2006): 47.

Process Theology, God's knowledge of the future depends on how it unfolds, which does not necessarily mean that what has already happened was predetermined before it took place.

Process and Anthropology

Process Theology wants to remove the distance between humankind and God, as the name implies. We should not see ourselves as servants of God (or other people) but as having a relationship with each other. This is what we are: we are 'at one' with each other; it is all one big family.

A person is a series of separate events. Each point is autonomous not only in relation to all others in the series, but also to God. It is self-determinative.¹⁷ God allows man to grow and mature. Every person has a path that is sovereignly supervised but not divinely imposed. Process theologians claim to take seriously the biblical portrayal of God as participating in and working through creation.¹⁸ After God does God's part in creation God allows man to have a portion of God's creative ability. For God to be perfect, he must be both powerful and leave other beings some power to resist his persuasion.¹⁹

God's existence is never questioned but he can only be known through experience and cannot be proved rationally or scientifically due to his unlimited nature. Some theologians have argued that God should not be treated as a person at all, regardless of

¹⁷ Bradshaw, "Process Theology," 708.

¹⁸ Cross and Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1341.

¹⁹ Pecorino, "Philosophy of Religion," 1.

how he may have interacted with humanity in the past. Alternatively, Whitehead and Hartshorne have argued the doctrine by saying God may communicate with everyone, not just Christians. All processes, natural, human, or divine, are regarded as social in nature, entailing inter-relationship, mutuality, and participation.²⁰

Process Theology and Christology

A look at how this theological thought views Christ is always appropriate. Cross and Livingstone offers some perspective.

Process theologians see the Incarnation of Christ in a classical sense, and not as an anomaly in the world. In Him there is ‘the disclosure in act’ of what had elsewhere been ‘divined in theory’, namely that love and persuasion are more significant and effective than power or coercion. Sin is interpreted as deviation from creative advance, through the free decision of the creature to choose his own narrow self-realization instead of the wider shared good. Redemption is acceptance by God of the creature’s achievement and the opening of future possibilities of true fulfillment in community with others. Heaven and hell are respectively the positive or negative acceptance by God of the creature’s achievement, since God receives all accomplished good and rejects all that is not consonant with His nature as love-in-action.²¹

Jesus Christ, as mentioned above, serves as a model of godliness for individuals. As with any model or presented standard, it is up to the one observing the model to fall in alignment with its display. This is not what comes by force, but this aligning process comes as the result of a persuasive display of love.

²⁰ Cross and Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1341.

²¹ Cross and Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1341.

Process Theology and Theodicy

Process Theology sees God as a subject, not an object. This can be seen as two elements: everything is influenced by everything else and God has no control over anything. This is to say that God influences the world and humanity, however it is the actions of those humans that produce disasters and the like. God is not the author of the bad that the world experiences.

Theodicy is an attempt to explain evil in the world by showing how it can coexist with a benevolent, all-powerful God. It has been criticized for not offering enough reasons why God would even allow humans to suffer since he created everything that exists. The Bible has been used as evidence against Process Theology because most believe it states that God does know what will happen in the future and could therefore prevent suffering if he wanted but simply allows it out of his own free will or to teach humanity. Another criticism is that Process Theology cannot explain how God would be all-powerful if he depended on his creations for their reactions throughout history.²²

Against this, Whitehead claimed that God did not have full control over time and events because they were influenced by other factors. The idea of soul-making instead of divine retribution was used in response to the question of why some people suffer while others do not even though both are believed to have original sin which would lead them to hell without any further explanation being offered.²³ Critics have also stated that it is impossible for an unlimited God who has no boundaries or limitations to create anything

²² Bradshaw, "Process Theology," 707.

²³ Bradshaw, "Process Theology," 707.

since giving him too many connections with the material world may cause him to change.²⁴

Process and Eschatology

The process of God's ability to preserve each event as an 'eternal object' adds an eschatological dimension to the theological system.²⁵ The traditional religious doctrine of 'eternal damnation' has been challenged by Whitehead and Hartshorne's idea that every person could end up in either heaven or hell depending on his or her response to the gospel. This is called 'soul making' because those who make it to heaven would be perfect and sinless as opposed to those sent to hell. It has been criticized for not providing any explanation on why God would allow some people into heaven and punish others, especially if all souls were created equal by him in the first place.

Process Theology and Grief

One of the prime lessons that we can learn from Process Theology is that there is no linear way to handle God. There are many ways to understand the complexity of who God is and how God works. Grief is a complex process that involves many different stages. It can be hard to understand why and how it works, but there are certain steps or phases of grief that most people go through, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. They are not always experienced in a particular order. In other words, the process in which individuals go through grief is different for every

²⁴ Bruce G. Epperly, *Process Theology* (Pensacola, FL: Energion Publications, 2020), Kindle.

²⁵ Bradshaw, "Process Theology," 708.

individual. The entry point is different and the time lingering and any particular phase is also different depending upon many varying scenarios, past experiences, and intensity of grief. Each of the phases will be explored individually.

Denial is one of the stages of grief that people often go through, and it has process in its nature. That is to say that experiencing the death of the loved one will sometimes put people in a place where they deny bad feelings and even the very truth of the death. The way that the person engages in this space called denial has its ups and downs as it relates to the level of denial. This can be seen as a process. The same is the case for anger. There are moments where the anger level is high while other moments where there is not as much anger. If the display of anger, and even denial, were to be plotted, it could be seen that change takes place regularly. It is the flow of anger intensity that lands this emotion in the category of process.

Another emotion that surfaces during grief is depression. While this might not be the case for every person that grieves, it is certainly an emotion that surfaces often. When looking at a person who is dealing with depression because of grief it can be seen that the place of heavy depression comes after a process that leads to such. For example, depression shows up after a period that entailed anxiety, frustration, loneliness, denial, and anger. The complexity of depression is that on one end of the spectrum it is the result of many somewhat debilitating emotions that culminate there. While on the other side, it is also the beginning of a process or journey toward dismantling those same emotions that led to depression. It is both a result and a starting point. This alone categorizes depression with process.

Observing the place of acceptance as the ultimate end in mind for those dealing with grief makes that place a companion of process. Getting to a place of submitting to the fact of death and its new dynamics of life presented because of such is the end goal. Arriving at that place, however, is no easy feat. In fact, staying in that place is even more difficult. This is why acceptance must also be looked at as a place consistent with process.

Each person's experience of grief will be unique and may include other emotions such as guilt and confusion. It is important to remember that grief does not necessarily follow any timeline, and it may take months or even years before a person reaches the acceptance stage. Additionally, the stages of grief often overlap and are intertwined. Commonly, people move back and forth between them as they work through their grief.²⁶ Understanding the process of grief, and that grief is a process, can help people better cope with those difficult emotions. The key is moving through the emotion as opposed to getting over them.

The idea of getting over grief is a misnomer. Grief is not something to get over, it is a process to work through. Movement and progress, as only described on an individual basis, is exactly what is necessary to accomplish this idea of working through it. The theological perspective of Process Theology will then undergird this concept of moving through grief.

It is also helpful to remember that there are some steps we can all take to support ourselves during this difficult time. Expressing your emotions in healthy ways, such as talking to close friends or family members who understand what you are going through,

²⁶ J. A. Larsen, "Grief," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling*, ed. David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 520.

seeking professional counseling, journaling, or engaging in creative activities like art or music, are all great ways to help you navigate the grief process. Additionally, self-care through activities such as getting enough rest, eating nutritiously, and exercising regularly can help restore balance in your life. Ultimately, it is important to remember that everyone grieves differently and there is no “right” way to do it – what matters most is finding coping mechanisms that work best for you.²⁷

Finally, if you find yourself feeling overwhelmed with emotion, try to remember that grief is a normal part of life and there is no shame in asking for help when needed. Lean on your support system or reach out to a mental health professional—you do not have to go through this alone. With some time, understanding, and self-care, you can eventually reach a place of acceptance in your grief journey.

*Is There Redeeming Value in All the Five Stages of Grief?*²⁸

Understanding that Process Theology often uses questions as a way to find new and ultimate truth in the things of life as it pertains to God and His interaction with creation, another question is appropriate to surface. This question has to do with the ultimate value of the five stages of grief as it relates to God and God's desire for man as played out in Process Theology.

Looking at depression gives an opportunity to examine God as it relates to an understanding of a divine desired emotional and mental status. Could it be giving up on yourself and your own efforts? There are many biblical examples of those journeying

²⁷ Help Guide, “Coping With Grief and Loss,” Help Guide, <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/grief-loss/coping-with-grief-and-loss.htm>.

²⁸ Larsen, “Grief,” 520.

from depression to a place of better emotional health. In each case, it looked like God was transforming God's self into whatever the individual needed during each phase of life. That is a process.

Still the question is whether depression can be an acceptable part of Process Theology and the part that process plays in the grieving person's life. Emotions that surround depression are emotions that could be acceptable in the full scheme of things knowing that even their God will be the necessary force to impact the grieving person. So maybe everything short of suicide is acceptable, since God will become whatever is necessary to positively impact and transform a person.

Denial is another area outlined in the stages of grief that would rise as a question of whether its value allows it to be consistent with the truth of Process Theology. Simply asked, can persons deny the truth of the current situation (in this case death and grief), and submit to the God of Process Theology?

Could numbness, as associated with denial, be appropriate at certain points? Consider the work of the anesthesiologists and the role of anesthesia. The job of this doctor and the use of a chemical serves to shield the patient from the most intense part of the pain associated with that current condition or procedure. In that person's process they may experience some pain at some point but in the hardest part of the journey, there is no pain. This is an act of kindness or the extension of mercy. With that imagery in mind, it would be understandable that God would be just as kind and extend just as much mercy to those who deal with the pain of death and grieving. Therefore, if a moment of denial is allowed by the sovereign God, it must be part of the process that God allows. God knows that temporary numbness may be the only thing that will keep the person who is grieving

from going over the edge and protect them in the process so that they might go further along in the process as some of the pain subsides. Temporary numbness, or denial, is acceptable as it stands as a singular part of a full process that persons must go through.

Depression and denial are two of the five stages that readily surface as possible contradictions to Process Theology, however these two are viewed in proper context and can certainly fall in alignment with this theological perspective. The others possibly have their place as well. Bargaining with God, moments of anger and ultimate acceptance all have their place. Labeling them with one word limits our understanding of each stage. This is why each stage ought to be looked at with a fuller context of its meaning and considered within the framework of Process Theology.²⁹

Conclusion

In summary, Process Theology reveals a God that is relational and operates in connection to that which humans feel and experience, including grief. This theological construct reminds those that are bereaved that this “concept of God emphasizes His relationships with creation, and that “His root attribute as love.”³⁰ This truth also reveals that this view of God supports the process of grief with the understanding that “all process, natural, human, or divine, is regarded as social in nature, entailing inter-relationship, mutuality, and participation.”³¹ Death, dying, and grief has purpose and has God as initiator and respondent. “Further, each event is given by God its initial aim,

²⁹ Jim L. Wilson, *Pastoral Ministry in the Real World: Loving, Teaching, and Leading God’s People* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 34.

³⁰ Cross and Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1341.

³¹ Cross and Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1341.

which by free decision it seeks to satisfy, hence actualizing its possibility. God is the ultimate recipient of all such realizations, which He harmonizes in accordance with His nature of love and then uses for further 'creative advance' in the cosmos."³²

There is a difference between God's "coercive" power and "persuasive" power.³³ Coercion is forcing the unwilling into a particular action or train of thought. To be coerced into anything removes the conception of willingness and essentially violates free-will. There is often the lack of love in situations of coercion. On the other hand, persuasive power rests in the spirit of love and opportunity. It relies on the power of the presented case of who God is. The power of God is strong enough to persuade God's creation into a loving relationship with God. "God is not omnipotent in the sense of being coercive. The divine has a power of persuasion rather than force."³⁴

According to Process Theology, there is no such thing as absolute order and disorder; both are just points of view. Our judgments about the degree of order and disorder depend on our perspective and assumptions. Process theologians think that we often attach too much importance to something or someone. We know how we participate in the reality we experience, but we hardly question why it seems so important in some cases even though it is nothing special in reality.

Ultimately, Process Theology can serve as foundational support for dealing with those who face death, dying, and grief. The fact that God will present God's self in varying ways to meet the needs of those with whom God intends to connect is key. As a

³² Cross and Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1341.

³³ David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 9.

³⁴ Pecorino, "Philosophy of Religion," 1.

person changes, their world changes, and as their acceptance of such changes so does the revealed God change. With love, God persuades his creation to be in a relationship with God. God also meets every need throughout the process that an individual goes through, even that of you.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

To complete the foundation for this project rhetoric theory is explored as the interdisciplinary focus. This theory undergirds the goal of preaching and the needed effect of such even to those that grieve. The tool of persuasion is the key concept for this foundational area. Being convinced to embrace a biblical perspective of death, dying, and grieving, is work that rhetoric informs. Logos, pathos, and ethos will guide the sermonic presentations to effectively persuade the congregants. An overview of communication will start this chapter; a complete understanding of the power of rhetoric is the ending goal.

Communication is the key to humankind interaction. The transfer of information and ideas, through presentation and reception, is the foundation of how people communicate. There is a universal need for individuals, and really all entities, to find a way to connect to each other. Effective communication is that way. Everything rises or falls on communication.

“As an academic discipline, Communication examines communication between people. ... The discipline focuses on contacts and bonds between people, both in private

and public contexts, and both face-to-face and mediated through various communication technologies.”¹

Communication Skills

Communication is certainly the exchange of information between two or more people, but effective communication requires skill. Intentional effort must be given to the practice and use of communication skills to ensure that information being presented will be received. There is just as much responsibility on the presenter as it is on the one who is in reception. Since this foundational chapter seeks to support the individual seeking to share information, the discussion about communication skills will be mostly one sided.

Attention should be given to the delivery of a message before one tries to tell how that message is to be received. The timing of the communication is important. If no consideration is given to when it is best to share the needed information, the person sharing might be putting themselves at a disadvantage. Offering important information early in the morning for a person who is more alert late at night does not make sense. Investigating the best time to communicate is worthwhile. Along those same lines is the location and atmosphere in which the communication is to take place. Having discussion in the middle of chaos would not be beneficial either. For this reason, a person wishing to express something to another person should seek to eliminate distractions before speaking. Having to compete with other external stimuli is a battle that the presenter will often lose. With that, checking the atmosphere to ensure there is a captive audience is always best.

¹ University of Jyväskylä, “Communication,” University of Jyväskylä, <https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/kivi/en/our-department/degree-programmes-disciplines/communication>.

Another communication skill has to do with comprehension. One of the goals in communication is to seek to understand over being understood. The converse is also needed. The flip side is to seek to be understandable. Every intention should be made to be as clear and often concise as possible when presenting information during communication. If the presenter is confused and has no idea what they desire to present, those receiving it will likely be just as or more confused. When a presenter does not seek to be understandable, it is as if they were writing an essay without a clear thought, main topic, or goal. In the case of that example, the communication is sure to be ineffective.

Still another communication skill is to be non-threatening. If the one on the receiving end of dialogue perceives that the speaker is poised for battle, the effectiveness of the conversation is already in question. Combative and argumentative presentations yield little effect. One way to attempt to present a side of the discussion in a way that could be received is to ask more questions. Sometimes statements seem accusatory, while questions are not as assumptive. Finding ways to break down the walls is a part of the skill set that is needed especially when the topic of discussion is weighty.

There is yet another skill that should be considered as we establish this foundation. It should be remembered that the listener is asked to recognize the intent of the speaker, so the one delivering the message must not take advantage of that. Having the right intentions is important. The motive of which internal integrity and commitment to truth is a vital necessity to effective communication. The attachment to truth should not just be external, it should be internal as well. This is to say that truth should not just be the content of what is shared, truthful intentions ought to be the guide of the communication as well.

Communication Theories

Some communication theories are: Speech-Act Theory, Inoculation Theory, Speech Codes Theory, Action Assembly Theory and Rhetoric Theory. Of these the last mentioned is the first to have been introduced to the world. And while all the mentioned theories have points of validity, there is a strong connection between preaching and the theory surrounding rhetoric. With that, Rhetoric Theory is the focus of this discussion.

Rhetoric Theory is defined in the following way:

Rhetoric occurs in response to an exigence or some kind of urgency, problem, or something not as it should be. Another characteristic of the situation is the audience— those individuals capable of affecting the exigence in some way. In addition, there are constraints in the situation—positive and negative factors that hinder or enhance the possibility that the audience will be able to affect the exigence. Rhetoric comes into being, then, when a rhetor observes or creates an exigence and offers discourse designed to bring the interests of the audience to bear on it. In essence, then, rhetorical theorists address some or all parts of the rhetorical situation—the rhetor and the degree of agency available to him or her; the audience and the constraints available to them; the discourse, message, or symbols used to address the exigence; how the exigence itself is constructed, created, and addressed; and the larger contexts— historical, economic, cultural, and symbolic—in which the situation is playing out.²

As noted above one of the keys to rhetoric theory is urgency.

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, the word "rhetoric" comes from the Greek word *rhētorikē*, which means the art of oratory. The term was first used in the fourteenth century to refer to a speaker who uses language skillfully and effectively.

Rhetoric is also concerned with making sure that an argument is convincing.

² Karen A. Foss, "Rhetorical Theory," *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 854-858.

Aristotle's definition of rhetoric provides a starting point for understanding how rhetoric has been defined: the art of discovering all the available means of persuasion.³ The goal of this communication tool, supported by this theory's premise, is to convince the listener of the thing that the presenter or source has been thoroughly convinced. "It is clear, then, that rhetorical study, in its strict sense, is concerned with the modes of persuasion. Persuasion is clearly a sort of demonstration, since we are most fully persuaded when we consider a thing to have been demonstrated. The orator's demonstration is an enthymeme, and this is, in general, the most effective of the modes of persuasion."⁴

Rhetorical modes of persuasion are different from a sermon's reasoning. Rhetoric involves the strategic use of symbols to convey ideas beyond the scope of the words themselves. In an argumentative paper, you use logic and evidence to illustrate your arguments in a step-by-step fashion that leaves little room for ambiguity or misinterpretation.⁵

There are at least three types of rhetoric. Deliberative rhetoric refers to information created to persuade others to take action. Epideictic rhetoric is the kind of rhetoric that praises or criticizes another person. Judicial rhetoric focuses on the justice or injustice of an accusation.⁶ Of these three, deliberative rhetoric stands out as the concept

³ Aristotle Stagiritis, *Rhetoric: The Complete Three Books* (Norwalk, CT: Appleton Century Crofts Publishers, 1924), Kindle.

⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Kindle.

⁵ Stephen Toulmin, "Rhetoric: An Examination of the Place of Rhetoric in Communication," *Communications Monographs* 39, no. 1 (Mar. 1972): 55-66, JSTOR.

⁶ David M. May, "Rhetoric," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

from Aristotle that is mostly aligned with preaching. In some instances, judicial or epideictic rhetoric will overlap in the presentation of a sermon. This happens when a person defends as if they were in a judicial setting; and another instance is when a person must praise as in offering positive information about an individual. In most cases though the persuading or the effort to convince is what happens in the declaration of a sermon.⁷ If all three components converge, deliberative rhetoric still emerges as that which offers the greatest percentage. Therefore, attention will mainly be given to deliberative rhetoric.

Aristotle taught that a speaker's ability to persuade an audience is based on how well the speaker appeals to that audience in three different areas: logos, ethos, and pathos. Considered together, these appeals form what later rhetoricians have called the rhetorical triangle.

Logos

Logos is based on logic or reasoning and uses facts as evidence to support its claims. It refers to using logic to prove something. This can be done by giving examples, facts or providing statistics and the like; it is the systematic rational argument of a presentation. Aristotle believed that audiences would be more easily persuaded if they trusted the person speaking. He developed three modes of persuasion depending on how much trust he thought an audience member would have for each speaker: logos was convincing people based on logic.⁸

⁷ Steve Walton, "Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction," *Themelios* 21, no. 2 (1996): 4.

⁸ Jaclyn Lutzke and Mary F. Henggeler, *The Rhetorical Triangle: Understanding and Using Logos, Ethos, and Pathos* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Writing Center, 2009), 1.

Here are questions to ask to ensure logos are present in every communication.⁹ Is the thesis clear and specific? Is the thesis supported by strong reasons and credible evidence? Is the argument logical and arranged in a well-reasoned order? Has the information been checked for accuracy? All these questions are important to ensuring that there is no falsity within the presentation. Checking and double checking the content is not overkill, it is a necessity.

Ethos

Ethos is based on the credibility of the speaker. Ethos refers to the character a person displays when trying to persuade others. Their honesty or dishonesty reveals their good or bad character. A person's ethos can be established by their position in society, previous experience, personal qualities, or accomplishments.

Ethos is important when trying to persuade others because it makes you appear trustworthy; your character is very relevant. This can be achieved if an individual shows compassion for your audience, empathy for others, integrity in your lifestyle, and responsibility for one's actions. These characteristics can be seen as parts of an individual's character which are used to measure their moral development. For example, an individual who has high levels of empathy is more likely to persuade others effectively because they will understand what other people think, feel, and want. Ethos, or character, is the ethical aspect of rhetoric.

Here are some questions that are necessary to ask to make sure ethos is present in communication. "What are the writer's qualifications? How has the writer connected

⁹ Lutzke and Henggeler, *The Rhetorical Triangle*, 2.

him/herself to the topic being discussed? Does the writer demonstrate respect for multiple viewpoints by using sources in the text? Are sources credible? Are sources documented appropriately? Does the writer use a tone that is suitable for the audience/purpose? Is the diction (word choice) used appropriate for the audience/purpose? Is the document presented in a polished and professional manner?”¹⁰

Pathos

Pathos is based on evoking an emotional response from the audience so they will side with your argument whether they acknowledge it or not. Pathos refers to making use of emotion or feelings; this can be done by appealing to fear, hope, or love. This part of the communication process uses the goal of emotional appeals.

Pathos is the appeal to an audience's emotion. The main purpose of pathos in rhetoric is to cultivate a feeling of connection between speaker and audience, allowing the audience to relate more easily with the message being conveyed by the speaker. This creates an emotional resonance that helps drive home what you are trying to say, allowing even your most dry arguments to hit home with your listener.

Some common ways to use pathos include creating stories or analogies about real people. Appealing directly to fears, hopes, sadness, joy, and using vivid comparisons or playing on stereotypes are other ways to ensure pathos is a vital part of communication.

“Are vivid examples, details and images used to engage the reader’s emotions and imagination? Does the writer appeal to the values and beliefs of the reader by using

¹⁰ Lutzke and Henggeler, *The Rhetorical Triangle*, 2.

examples readers can relate to or care about? These are questions that need to be included in communication to ensure that pathos is a part of communication.”¹¹

The Three Combined

All in all, ethos, logos, and pathos are important rhetorical modes that need to be used together for an individual to persuade others effectively. These three components cannot be separated, presented individually without the other two and still be completely effective. An individual cannot be persuasive if they just use one rhetorical mode. This is not to speak of its impossibility, rather it speaks to its improbability. This is why complete attention should be given to all three modes of rhetoric communication so that the most optimal chance of effectiveness is reached. When these three are combined the audience is likely to be receptive and obtain great understanding. Further, that which is tempted to be the action of which they are being persuaded will be accomplished.

Every theory has both pros and cons in the outcome of its use. The same is the case with the combination of ethos, logos, and pathos. While accomplishing good is certainly possible, the opposite is also the case. In other words, if someone wanted to use these three rhetoric molds and masterful concert to persuade someone to do wrong or something detrimental to others, the skill set would often yield positive results. As such, the results are only positive because persuasion was accomplished; not because the action of which they were persuaded was positive. While these techniques can be used both ethically and unethically, it is essential that we know how to use these persuasive tools responsibly.

¹¹ Lutzke and Henggeler, *The Rhetorical Triangle*, 2.

Rhetoric Devices

A rhetorical device is a use of language that is intended to influence its audience. Repetition, figurative language, and even rhetorical questions are all examples of rhetorical devices. When these differing tools are at play, the effectiveness of the presentation, whether oral or written, is heightened. Intentional use of rhetorical devices helps to develop consistent persuasive communication.

Repetition is a communication tool that is used in many instances to drive a point of emphasis. While the information of importance is not always repeated in the same way, the heart of the message is offered repeatedly to make sure it is understood by all. Rephrasing and repackaging is the part of this tool that makes it effective. When a person can hear the same thing in a different way the chance of them absorbing the needed content is higher than them only hearing it once. For example, the first time the concept is heard only portions of it are clearly received. Then when it is rephrased and repeated some of the portions that may have been missed the first time are now able to be readily consumed by the hearer. In that same example it is certain that by the third or fourth time that concept is presented, the person receiving the message has filled in any gaps they may have had while receiving the message during the initial tries.

There are times when repetition as a communication style and rhetoric device does not have repackaging as its goal. The goal in this case is to state the same thing the same way multiple times. While this may seem to be insulting to the hearer, it is a strategy that works well. The repetition does not indicate that the person hearing the message had some level of inadequacy in their listening skills, it simply indicates that the

message being repeated is so important that it is worth having everyone hear it over and over again.

Having a point repeated within one oral presentation is one way that we see repetition whether it is restated in the same format or received into another format. However, using this device over the span of multiple presentations is also effective. In the church world sermon series provide opportunity for this. A year-long theme that is addressed periodically also falls in the category of the rhetorical device called repetition. When the theme is repeated, it is a reminder to those who are listening and learning. This is important because too often information that is important is somehow easily forgotten.

Figurative language is another rhetorical device used to enhance effectiveness in communication. People hear stories better than facts. This is to say that most can comprehend what they are able to engage with. While facts are important, if they are not framed within a narrative the facts might be lost. There is nothing like an engaging story. Once a person is hooked, they are more likely to receive information presented. Being hooked is just to start though, language that draws people to the presentation keeps the listener excited and engaged. It is then how the transfer of information is done best.

Flowery words and dream-like scenarios in sentences all appeal to the imagination. When an oral presenter can help the hearer in their mind what is being portrayed, it makes the message more believable. Instead of just saying 'can you imagine this or that,' having them to imagine does the job. What should they hear, what should they smell? What is the environment like at this moment? Is it light or is it dark? Are people around or is this an isolated set of events? The answer to these questions and so many more can be painted through the word choice. Instead of hoping that the listener

will receive the message, every intent should be made to choose the right groupings of words so that the person hearing can almost see what you are saying. When the listener says, 'I can see that,' if the job of the presenter was done well, that comment can be close to reality.

Asking rhetorical questions is another device of rhetoric. As indicated by its name its use is for additional persuasion of the listener. Questions are asked in a way that does not require or expect an answer from the listeners. It is asked simply to focus the thought pattern of the listener and to make a point for consideration. In this instance, it is possible that the listener would have never considered this side of the argument had it not been for the question asked out loud. It is almost as if the rhetorical question serves as a pointer toward the information that is important; its goal is to cause the listener to think.

In summary, rhetoric devices are used to ensure that the communication necessary is effective communication. To embrace rhetoric as a form of communication, one must use language skills to convince an audience to take any action or accept an idea. Rhetoric can be used for making speeches, writing persuasive essays, and other documents, and in everyday conversation. A good sermon should include rhetoric while persuading others of it is reasoning to conclude.¹² Preaching often uses many of these named devices to convince congregants of the truth that is being presented.

Rhetoric and Message Production

Stephen Toulmin is an expert in the communication field that has presented a strategy for producing a message that will be effective. Toulmin's model of message

¹² Lynn Hall and Leah Wahlin, "A Guide to Technical Communications: Strategies and Seven Applications," Pressbooks, <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/engrtechcomm/chapter/what-is-rhetoric/>.

production consists of a claim, grounds, warrant, backing, modal qualifier, and rebuttal.¹³

The claim is the conclusion or argument being made. The grounds are the data and facts offered to support the claim. To logically connect the grounds to the claim, a warrant is given. The backing is used to support the warrant and the qualifiers make a statement about the strength of the claim. The effectiveness of the message that was produced is then assessed by another theory called message evaluation.¹⁴

Rhetoric and Cognitive-Behavioral Theory

The theory of cognitive-behavioral model speaks to the opportunity for change of action because of a change in thoughts. When a significant alteration is needed in the way individuals live and respond to life's situations, professional counselors believe that no lasting change can be made without thought patterns being adjusted. Any attempt at change without a mindset shift is temporal at best. Therefore, all lasting external actions must be undergirded and sustained by the internal shift. In the Book of Proverbs, 23:7, we find the biblical support of this theory: "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

Rhetoric and the abovementioned theory complement each other well. In fact, they can flow as a step by step merged process. First, an individual must be convinced of the need for a new thought pattern. From there they can be persuaded of the thought that is necessary for the resultant changed behavior. Ultimately, the new way of living is the achieved goal.

¹³ Scott T. Paynton and Linda K. Hahn, *Rhetorical Theories Paradigm*, Social Science, [https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Communication/Introduction_to_Communication/Introduction_to_Communication_\(Paynton_and_Hahn\)/05%3A_Communication_Theory/5.08%3A_Rhetorical_Theories_Paradigm](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Communication/Introduction_to_Communication/Introduction_to_Communication_(Paynton_and_Hahn)/05%3A_Communication_Theory/5.08%3A_Rhetorical_Theories_Paradigm).

¹⁴ Hall and Wahlin, "A Guide to Technical Communications," <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/engrtechcomm/chapter/what-is-rhetoric/>.

Counselors and therapists use rhetoric in this model of therapy quite often. As they listen to the client sharing about the difficulty or dramatic experience in life, they are finding ways to connect them to a change in that thought pattern. This often happens as strategies and practical coping mechanisms are presented for acceptance and adherence. As the client sees and understands the value of a strategy, they will begin to implement it to allow their actions to be altered.

Rhetoric and Worden's Grief Model

Understanding that grief is a process that everyone will experience, there is a positive benefit that rhetoric has on helping others in embracing models that relate to grief. There are tasks that people will need to be persuaded to do in order to grieve in a healthy manner. A positive voice in a grieving person's life, with the right information, can make a world of difference for that grieving person.

Worden offers four tasks that grieving individuals should embrace. The first is to accept the loss that has been experienced. Without the persuasive speech of a trusted voice, this task is likely to be left undone. The partnering in the grief process by someone who can speak to the grieving person is necessary. That interaction, which is normally one-on-one, has the potential to positively move the bereaved along the path and process of that grief.¹⁵

Another is to acknowledge the pain of that loss. Individuals must also adjust to a new environment considering the loss. Reinvesting in the reality of a new life is another task. These tasks of grief are not linear and accomplished in a step-by-step fashion. They

¹⁵ N. Abi-Hashem, "Grief Therapy," ed. David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 521.

are not a target place to be achieved, but they fluctuate as a process that seeks to accommodate a new normal lifestyle without what was lost.

Rhetoric and Preaching

Preaching is a dithyrambic declaration laced in persuasive rhetoric. The preacher desires for the congregation to comprehend what is being offered. The preacher wants the parishioners to receive the call to action that is presented. The preacher would love for the listener to believe the truth that they work hard to communicate. This is why the preacher preaches with excitement, energy, and great effort.

Preaching is an assignment from God. preachers are called to represent and communicate to God's people on God's behalf. The scriptures explained, along with the message that is to be offered, must be packaged in a presentable form. That is why preaching is not just a call, it is also an art form. Preaching requires skill if it is to be effective communication.

This skill must be implemented prior to the delivery of the sermon. There should be some rhetorical work during preparation.

In the late 20th century, a new tool for biblical study developed called rhetorical criticism. The approach was based upon recognition that an understanding of the use of rhetoric in Scripture may provide a useful guide for interpretation. This approach involves studying ancient handbooks on rhetoric in order to understand the models that educated people, particularly during the NT era, used to communicate. Then one compares these models to sections or entire books of Scripture. The method may help one understand the writer's message, its structure and purpose, and even how the original readers might have responded.¹⁶

¹⁶ Charles L. Quarles, "Rhetoric," ed. Chad Brand et al., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1397.

As with every skill, preaching must be practiced to achieve the goal that rhetoric and preaching have. The ethos, logos, and pathos that is necessary and other forms of persuasive speech ought to be present in the preaching of a sermon. The major intersection of where preaching and rhetoric come together surrounds those three necessary components.

Every preacher needs the rhetoric component of ethos. The message presented is no better than the integrity of the one presenting it. Simply put, a preacher's declaration without matching lifestyle or conviction of the truth, can water down the sermons' communicative effectiveness. The preacher must live what they preach.

The prevalent display of lack of integrity in Christian pulpits by some preachers has in turn made it more difficult to have an ethos in preaching evident by others. The overall integrity of preachers has been diminished because of the lack thereof by a few. This unfortunate reality is no excuse for the preacher to abandon 'truth living' for fake living. If preaching is to be effective and ethos is to be embraced and maintained.

Logos in preaching has to do with the content of the sermon. Content matters. What is being said is important. Words matter. The preacher's word choice is important. Truth matters. Accuracy and biblical correctness are important.

Listing what matters and what is important shows the importance of logos in preaching. This rhetoric component cannot be overlooked. It cannot be dismissed because of impeccable ethos. Integrity and presenting incorrect information are unacceptable. Integrity must be accompanied by well-researched, justifiable information that can be classified as truth.

Preachers must take time to craft what is being said. Preparation beforehand is key to this. Spontaneous unprepared sermons should be rare because presenting under the pressure of little to no information about the text or the message that God wants to give, is doomed for ineffectiveness at best and misleading at worst.

Moreover, logos must be one of the focuses of preaching and rhetoric because the day of taking the preacher at their word no longer exists. In real time, people will be researching what the preacher says. The ability to fact check is at the parishioners' fingertips. Therefore, it is important to give attention to correct content of a sermon as to be aligned with the value of truth telling.

The last component of rhetoric is pathos and it correlates to preaching. This is especially true in the tradition of the African American preacher. Passion and expressed conviction flows through the sermon presentation of the preacher. When the preacher believes what they are preaching, it is evident to those who are positioned to hear. In fact, this display of passionate excitement stands in contradiction to the person who is forced to share that which neither excites them nor has convinced them of its inherent truth. There is no joy in that type of presentation. However, when the preacher believes in what they are saying they are more likely to be persuasive as they aim to convince the hearer of that same level of belief. The belief will fuel passion. And passion will show up as the present uses every available tool to assist in the passionate presentation. "Aristotle saw the need for variation of volume, pitch and rhythm and argued that the proper use of these was highly influential and persuasive."¹⁷

¹⁷ Steve Walton, "Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction," *Themelios* 21, no. 2 (1996): 5.

Conclusion

In summary rhetoric is “Art of communicating persuasively and memorably. Scriptural authors employed various rhetorical devices to communicate effectively. Understanding these methods of expression enables students of the Bible to understand their messages more clearly and to share them more effectively with others.”¹⁸

Rhetoric theory connects to the foundation of this project in many ways. First, the biblical text as found in John chapter eleven affirms the power of rhetoric. Jesus speaks to persuade Mary and Martha of a new perspective about death to help them grieve. The historical figure, Saint John Chrysostom, was the master of rhetorical presentations. The golden-mouthed preacher masterfully used the tools of rhetoric theory in his sermons and thereby made a major impact on the life of the church. Lastly, rhetoric intersects with Process Theology in that logic and reason helps individuals to embrace the reality of the present, as it changes and becomes. Rhetoric is regaining something of its classical standing in scholarship, and the fair-minded exclamation of context and strategies of persuasion promises to be a growing source of understanding, particularly in cross disciplinary endeavors.¹⁹ The truth of this statement is evident as the foundations of this project intertwine. This interdisciplinary focus allows us to see the benefit of rhetoric theory and how it is prevalent in many areas of life including the discussion and preaching of the topic death, dying, and grieving.

¹⁸ Quarles, “Rhetoric,” 1397.

¹⁹ Peter Donovan, “Theology as Rhetoric,” *The Personalist Forum* 12, no. 1 (1996): 11–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20708720>.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

Death, dying, and grief combined are the focus of this project. This triad of concepts makes up one central theme that is to be addressed. Death, in this instance, has to do with the physical transition of another. This could be the transition of a family member or friend, all the way to a stranger in a distant place with whose demise a person has become familiar. Dying has at least two tracks of understanding for this work. In the first track, dying points to a person's inevitable end. The death that is to come, for the person that is aware of its eventual arrival, is called dying. This thought is often unwelcome and thought to be something that is a long time away. Dying, then, is more theoretical. In the second track, dying has more to do with the stages just before death. For this thought track, death is usually closer in view. This is the point of dying in which a person is actively transitioning.

Grief is the response to both death and dying. Grieving is a process and is individually journeyed through personal stages and varied phases. Grief is often referred to as emotional suffering and the feeling of sorrowful distress.¹ This internal response has a distinct outward expression. Several studies have examined stages of grief and the Bible

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Grief," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 904.

speaks to periods of mourning. “Grief and mourning are the practices and emotions associated with the experience of the death of a loved one or of another catastrophe or tragedy.”² Those who grieve certainly need to receive ministering, preferably by a professional counselor or by ordained clergy, to assist them in this difficult process.

Methodology

Ministry to the bereaved is one that New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando has endorsed since the early days of the church. In particular, there are three ways that the church has worked to care for and support those dealing with loss. This loss, the loss of a loved one and not loss in the wider generic sense, has been addressed through Grave Matters Class, preaching at funerals, and Grief Share sessions. While these methods had some level of effectiveness in helping the congregations manage bereavement, they seem to have limitations. The Grave Matters Class is a group of sessions designed to walk participants through practical issues that need to be addressed in preparation for death. Individual pre-planning, by the individuals themselves, is encouraged in hopes of relieving the family members who remain of the burden of planning and paying for end-of-life matters. This way the family is only worried about grieving. After all, planning a funeral and the like is difficult and becomes even more difficult while dealing with grief. This class is about stewarding the opportunity given to every person. A good steward handles the business pertaining to their final financial, legal, and physical plans.

Increasing the attitude towards participating in this Grave Matters Class was one of the secondary goals of this process. Prior to this, it was somewhat difficult to get

² John W. Drakeford and E. Ray Clendenen, “Grief and Mourning,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand et al. (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 690.

participants to sign up to take the class. Possibly, for some, the conversation surrounding death and dying is too uncomfortable to undertake. For others, maybe the thought is that death is so far removed from their minds because that event seems to be nowhere near.

Another way that the church presently addresses the concept of death, dying, and grief is through a different set of sessions, entitled Grief Share. Unlike Grave Matters that seek to address the topic on the front end, Grief Share is a ministry that takes place after the death of a loved one. In a group-therapy type session, persons that have experienced loss gather to “grieve together.” The concept of community, interdependent grieving, embraces the commonality that all who experienced loss share with those that have loved much will grieve much. These sessions are guided by a grief counselor and conducted with the use of video presentations.

The final way that the church, to this point, has attempted to address the triad – death, dying, and grief – is through preaching at a funeral. This seems to be the most recognized and celebrated ministry effort aimed at assisting those who are grieving. By all indications, it is also the least effective. However, it is necessary, and it even has its level of impact. But due to the very sensitive state in which most family members and friends find themselves, the sermon that is preached has diminished helpfulness. Little of the information presented during a normal, less emotionally stressful worship is retained; the retained information from a funeral service is an even smaller amount. The temporary inspiration, that helps the bereaved cope for that moment, is the normal course of the day for funeral services.

This project, a strategic sermon series on death, dying, and grief, took place at the New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando over the span of six to seven weeks. During

those weeks, participants were assessed as to how well they interacted with the topic, then engaged four sermons, and ultimately saw if there was any change in how they reacted to the aforementioned topic. The two weeks of reflection served as the pre-assessment and post-assessment periods held one week prior to the sermon series and one week after its ending.

Project Hypothesis

This project seeks to affirm that if pastors offer periodic, systematic preaching about death, dying, and grief, via sermon series, then congregants will be better equipped to deal with the triangulated concept of death, dying, and grief. There is a strong thought that this focused preaching will enhance the congregants' ability to navigate that difficult inevitability of life.

Expected Results for this Project

The participants are expected to have a stronger biblical understanding of death so much so that they would be more equipped to navigate that season of life. Even as grief is unavoidable in life, that process will become more manageable as the biblical perspective is embraced. Further, the way in which individuals offer consolation to others as they are grieving was an anticipated indication of the impact of this project.

Research Methods

Using qualitative methodology, this project used three data collection methods. The first method was a survey which consists of two questionnaires; one set of questions

was offered at the beginning and then at the end of the project. Then throughout the project, focused journaling was administered to collect data. Guided questions and sentence starters were used to prompt thoughtful responses from the participants.

The last means of which to collect data in this project was focused group discussions with the participants. To get a more comprehensive report of the sermon series' impact, this tool had to be used because both verbal and non-verbal responses can be recorded. Often, there is more information gathered from what is revealed beneath the surface than what is readily offered through voiced replies.

Collectively, these three tools allowed for gathering a full set of data and thereby establishing a robust picture of the bearings of the project. With no piece of information being discarded or minimized, every bit of information was useful for the study of the hypothesis' viability.

Implementation

Context and Professional Associates

For this project, three people were identified and invited to be context associates. Each one of these three serves as leaders, on varying levels, of the New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando. Their vantage point from their seat of service allows for any gaps or blind spots in the project facilitation to be noticed and addressed.

The professional associates, while being my peers, also have terminal degrees in their areas of expertise. One is a doctor of the church with a focus on leadership, while the other two have non-church-related doctorates in medicine and law. Together, these

three will serve as the voice of those who can ascertain the project's quality and ensure that it is proficient in meeting the high standard. Their know-how will be helpful to me and the project implementation.

One person from both groups will also serve as proposed study facilitators. This method will ensure that I, who is also the senior leader, will not have any undue or unjust influence on the participants' selection or outcome of the student within this project.

Church Leaders

The executive council and diaconate of the church was briefed on the plan for this project and its potential benefit. As leaders of this congregation, their buy-in, and support of this effort was important. Further, any logistic and programmatic insight they might offer to assist in the smooth implementation of the project was to be welcomed.

The Participants

The goal was to have fifteen to twenty adults participate, and they were recruited from within the congregation of New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando. No compensation was provided. After responding to an open invitation in the bulletin, each participant received the expected commitment of their participation. They also received an explanation of the inherent risk of exposure or re-exposure to traumatic experiences and the steps that have been taken to protect and reduce such risk.

Pre- and Post-Test Questions

1. Have you experienced the death of a loved one? How recently?

2. Are you having trouble accepting the death of your loved one? If so, to what degree?
3. How much does your grief interfere with your daily living?
4. Are there any seasons of life when it is difficult to operate as you normally would because of the death of a loved one or the thought thereof?
5. During your previous time of grief, how comforted have you felt because of the ministry of the church?
6. Do the scriptures aid you in your grieving process?

Some of the aforementioned questions were retrieved and adapted from Dr. Katherine Shear and Dr. Susan Essock's Brief Grief Questionnaire.³ Still there are other questions that seek to ascertain the role of the church and its ministry in helping congregants deal with death, dying, and grief.

Preliminary Questions for Focused Journaling

1. How did you feel going into the worship experience knowing that the subject of death, dying, and grief was going to be covered?
2. Was there anything presented during the sermon this week that prompted a reaction within you? Was it helpful? Was it enlightening? Did it assist you on your journey of coping with grief?
3. How did you feel after leaving the service and the sermon on this topic?

³ Katherine Shear and Susan Essock (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 2002), 1.

Schedule

The span of this project was well over four months, as this allowed for preparation, implementation, and analysis of observations made. Intentionally, the preparatory work had to be completed individually. Selection of foundational texts and best practices were examined. Development of the ultimate goals and first steps to achieve such were deployed. Implementation of this project then moved beyond some of the individual preliminary work to that which required interaction with others. A meeting with context associates and with professional associates was scheduled and held. Additionally, there was a separate meeting with proposed study facilitators.

Development of survey questions and the recruitment of participants were the next two tasks that were completed. At that point, preparation for sermons to be used in the series was also being made. This part of the process was extremely important to ensure that great attention was given to the lessons learned from studying Saint John Chrysostom and his intentional delivery style along with the principles of rhetoric as an effective communication style. If there was no intentionality given to sermon development and delivery, the impact of the sermons, and consequently the entire project, would have been at risk.

Once the group of participants assembled, instructions about the flow of the study, and the expectation related to the same was discussed. During that initial session, a pre-questionnaire was administered. This important tool, as mentioned earlier, was the first of the data collection points. The pre-questionnaire would become the benchmark needed to be able to compare against the post questionnaire to investigate any possible changes. The hope was that positive advancements will be observed through such.

Next, it was time to preach the sermon series and facilitate focus group sessions. During the Sunday morning worship experience, over the time span of four weeks, the sermons were presented. While the identified participants listened to the sermons either in person or online, the rest of the congregation had the opportunity to receive from the series. It is to be noted that from the group of worshippers that did not sign up to be a part of the focus group, there were many that shared the impact of the sermons. This was a great boost because it was not initially clear how the sermon series on death would be received by those that were not prepared for such through detailed conversation about the flow of the project. Nonetheless, the sermons seem to be very helpful to most that decided to be in attendance online or in the physical building.

After each sermon, that group of participants gathered in one of the meeting rooms at the church. Those participants that attended worship online were able to join in the after-worship group meeting via Zoom. This post sermon discussion was guided by context associates as I was there to take notes, collect data, and only offer needed clarity as warranted. There were two primary chunks of questioning during this time. They were as follows:

- Were you able to identify the key concepts from today's sermon?
- What was the concept and how did it aid you in the grieving process or your understanding of grief?
- What change will you implement in your ministry of supporting other grieving members of NCBC?

Robust discussion surfaced in reaction to the sermons of death, dying, and grief. The participants' responses are summarized in a few anecdotal results, which are presented

later in this chapter. The post-sermon discussions ended with a focused journaling exercise being assigned.

Then at the end of this entire process, the post-questionnaire was administered. The results of the two questionnaires, which were coded by the context associates to allow for anonymity, were examined side by side to ascertain trends. These trends, along with the other data collected served as the lynchpin for determining the success of the project. This was the overall structure and schedule for the project. Now let's look at the sermons within the sermon series with greater detail.

Sermons

The congregation was ready to engage in the difficult topic because of the setting in which it was presented. The majority of the sermon series took place during a high attendance season at the church -- the weeks leading up to and directly after Easter.

The text used for the sermon series was John chapter eleven. This pericope, as examined in an earlier chapter, served as the foundation for the following sermons:

Part I - Dealing With Sovereign Silence.

Part II - Knowing What To Say.

Part III - Embracing New Realities.

Part IV - Facing the Future.

The first sermon was taken from principles identified in John 11:17-22, "So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. And many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother. Now Martha, as soon

as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. Now Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.”

The points of emphasis on the sermon asked the listener to perceive His presence, pace your progress and present your piece. These three steps were offered as an effort to help those that are grieving to deal with the silence from God that they may experience. The congregation was pushed to look for the presence of God even when it might be difficult to hear the voice of God. God’s presence is the needed stability that the bereaved must be willing to perceive in the face of the uncertainty and uncomfortability of what seems like silence.

Then, as progress is sought, there must be a willingness to pace that progress. Here, it must be mentioned that progress is subjective and has to do with any personal or divinely set goals or a desired place to achieve. This is the progress that is really needed. As such, no one should expect everyone to behave the same. Nor should anyone compare our journey to someone else’s. There is no linear pattern to grief.

Even in the pursuit of acceptance of the death of a loved one, it is still permissible for the bereaved to proclaim how they feel at the moment. In fact, the model of the text essentially is an invitation for the person dealing with grief to speak their mind and to share the concerns of their heart. It is hard to have peace when you cannot present your piece. It is once the concern is shared that the true feelings are exposed. This also gives the Lord an invitation to address the area of the need. Without this important step, there may not be an opportunity for faith to seep out. In verse twenty-two, the faith of the sister comes to bear as she says, “But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God

will give You.” This faith, even as little as it may be, only surfaces as she decided to share her concern with the Lord. The principle that was presented in this last transition of the sermon was meant to express the appropriateness of expressing their concern to the Lord.

The second sermon in the series was entitled “Knowing what to say.” John 11:21-24 says “Now Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Knowing what to say first has to deal with knowing when to say anything at all. When seeking to console a person dealing with bereavement, the one offering the help must make sure it is being offered at a fitting time. People really do not know where other people are on the grief journey and that is why they ought to hear that bereaved person first. Everyone seeking to offer healthy help to those grieving should avoid the scriptural gut-punch of a poorly timed Bible lashing. The intent to be helpful is not enough. Good intentions have injured people in bad ways. Here are some of the points to remember as you seek to say something to a grieving person that will be helpful.

First and foremost, the individual must listen first and listen more. This will allow a person to hear the other person before offering advice. Then, the one seeking to offer support can thoughtfully respond to their inquiry of the bereaved. While responding the person must measure their words and remember that sensitivity and intentionality are key. Individuals should prayerfully engage in the conversation initiated by the one that is

grieving. Lastly the person desiring to offer health help should stop talking when all the signs for such are there.

Another step is to be ready to use a friendly tone when attempting to soothe the pain of another's grief. It can easily be seen when the comments offered are forced; the tone can sometimes seem adversarial, combative, or simply irritated. Offering help to the bereaved should be voluntary and not obligatory. Obligatory service is not always sincere service. People need to know that you care and knowing you care is more important than anything else.

The sermon emphasis then shifted to focus on the content of the words that are to be presented to those grieving. The help offered must be foundationally true. Only speak the truth as you know it. Do not speak partial truth. Do not speak with speculation and assumptions. Do not speak statements that are fudged to make others feel good. There is enough truth in the clearly presented principles of scripture to give the needed consolation.

The last shift in this second sermon dealt with a concept surrounding future tense. The model that the Lord provides has discussion in the terms of that which is to come. It seems to help the sister focus on the future as a means of hope. Jesus said to this sister that her brother would live again. This was not a promise for the brother to hear; the brother was dead, and he could not hear. This was hope for the grieving sister. There was a promise that there will be days after this. Whether it is the next day or the last day there is hope for a better, brighter day.

The next sermon in the series focused on the identification of the person and power of Jesus considering the new reality that He presents. The text for this message

was John 11:25-26 “Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”” Embracing New Realities serves as the title of the sermon.

Recognizing the reality of the person of Jesus is the first step in embracing new realities. Jesus presents himself as the One who is always present and available. This sense of being ever-present has a way of assuring the grieving person of the Lord’s presence with them wherever they may be on the grief journey. This brings new meaning to the saying ‘the Lord is with you.’

Then there is the reality of perspective from Jesus. People ought to look at the physical then spiritual. There is a difference between the physical man and the spiritual man. One supporting text is 2 Corinthians chapter five where Paul talks about being absent from the body, that is physical death. Then he talks about the spiritual man, the soul, the real self is present with the Lord. The reality to embrace is that it is ok to consider both perspectives. That is the truth that was being proclaimed in that sermon highlight.

Lastly, there is the reality of the promise from Jesus. Here is the reality that the promise offers are we will live again physically and never die spiritually. Another reality that was present here is that death is the believers’ transportation to everlasting life. The sermon then offered an invitation to embrace the necessity to consider each of the new realities as something to live by and believe in.

The last sermon surrounded the question that Jesus asked at the end of John 11:25 and her response in verse twenty-six, “..and everyone who lives and believes in Me will

never die. Do you believe this?” She said to Him, “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, *even* He who comes into the world.”

The start of the question has value. The wording says, ‘Do you’ and not ‘will you’ or even ‘should you.’ The question starts out with a present tense line of interrogation. The start of the question places the proposition to right now. It acknowledges the grieving sister’s current reality. An acknowledgment of a person's status is important as it would be difficult to move toward a promising future without clear understanding of where they are mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

The sermon then moved to focus on the art of the question. Here, a close look was given to a skill that is sometimes overlooked; the art of questioning for many is a lost art. Questions can be the most effective and often non-threatening way to interact with others. Statements, especially during the sensitive time of death and grief and be received as hard and cold; they can come off as too authoritative. There are also times that they seem accusatory. Questions open the door for the bereaved to share where they are without the assumption of the one seeking to offer help being thrust upon them. Asking questions is a skill that invites others into what is hoped to be a safe caring space for meaningful dialogue to take place.

To make this skill even more effective, identifying and understanding the other person’s grief language is important. As questions are being formed, a person should be able to see if the bereaved person expresses, they are in control, crying, concealing, complaint, calm or confusion. Different style of grieving does not mean that a person is grieving. Understanding this will assisting in know how to package the needed questions and will assist in the comprehension of the answer to the same.

The last shift in the sermon addressed the heart of the question. Essentially, the question that was asked went directly to ascertaining the principles and priorities held by the grieving person. The reason this is important is because of the cognitive behavioral connection that exists. People behave based on their beliefs. The goal is to embrace what is believed and allow that belief to shape the way the grieving person continues to move.

Summary of Learning

The assembled group helped to shape many areas of learning during this project. Their participation and input offered many key takeaways and assisted in the compilation of recommendations to be included in the conclusion of this chapter. The results of the project will be summarized in two ways. The first way to present the project results is with the trends that surfaced as several percentages of key areas were observed. Then the stories and testimonies of the participants will be discussed as anecdotal results. Together, these two groups of observation will offer things learned from this project.

The initial interest in participating in this project yielded twenty participants. At the end of the study the actual number of participants were four males and nine females that completed the entire planned process. These thirteen participants listened to all four sermons and participated in all the post-sermon discussions. Many lessons were learned from the input offered by these project participants.

A Few Trends

There are several noteworthy trends that surfaced while analyzing the results of this project. First, there were double the number of females that signed up to participate

in this project then males. This interesting phenomenon traveled throughout the actual implementation of the project as well. The females were more willing to talk about their feelings of grief and how they were dealing with the death of loved ones more than males. The males and the group participated more in the writing exercises than they did with the verbal discussions. During the moments of their writing exercise, the males gave mostly short concise responses as opposed to their counterparts which offered a more protracted detailed response.

With the identification of this trend, it is important for those who desire to interact with those dealing with bereavement and grief to consider their audience and the likelihood of the recipient to talk or not to talk much. This is to say that the pastor who is preaching and engaging congregants may have to alter the approach of any possible post sermon discussion to fit the pattern of which the level of communicative participation is enacted. The pastor may not receive a great deal of feedback in open forum from any male who that pastor is speaking with. This truth came as a surprise simply because I thought that the norm spoken about the difference between a male's and female's willingness to discuss emotional and highly sensitive information did not have the divide that it once had. Unfortunately, this project proved that the previously thought differences between male and female are largely still in place.

Five of the participants, which is just about 38%, admitted to being on the receiving end of those who offered unhealthy help. Surprisingly, this number was lower than anticipated. With the prevailing amount of unhealthy help being exchanged from person to person, I expected that more of the participants would report having been the recipients of such. Fortunately, this was not the case. The five that had received

unbiblical and untruthful comments said that they received them from a church person or in the church setting. Three of those five people believed that the person offering the help did so to positively impact them. In those cases, it was believed that their intentions were pure.

Conversely, 77% of the respondents noted that they had unfortunately been in the position where they offered unhealthy help. After actively listening to the sermon series, they realized that some of the well-intentioned talk that they offered to those who were part of the congregation did not align with biblical truth as it relates to death and dying. Consequently, and unknowingly, they offered grieving persons sentiments that would carry little to no value in the long run. They pointed out that this was due to lack of knowledge as well as feeling the need to have something to say.

Being freed from always having something to say and understanding that silence is sometimes useful was a help to many in this group. Modeling the fact that Christ himself was silent for a while before speaking helped them to understand that they too did not have to rush to say something. Sometimes silence is sovereign. Furthermore, when something needs to be said, the strategy of speaking only the truth in the right tone and at the right time is something that they vowed to embrace. The hope is that while this is duplicated, the same will take place. Congregants will learn what to say and when to say it to a grieving person. Ultimately, the high percentage of those who were at one point offering unhealthy help should diminish because of preaching and dialogue this concern.

This goal is likely achieved as strategies are presented within the sermon series. During discussions, many shared how particular strategies presented during the sermonic

presentation was going to be implemented in their daily lives. Some of those strategies gleaned are as the sermon reminded them to be spirit led when attempting to offer help. All good help is not the assignment that has been given. “Pause and make sure this is my God assignment.” Timing is everything. Participants were encouraged to not only say the right thing but make sure it is at the right time. Oftentimes, good intentions have injured people in bad ways. Being intentional with words is key to offering health help.

Another trend worth noting is something that surfaced from the pre- and post-questionnaire. The question was asked whether the participants believe that the scriptures aided them in dealing with matters of death, dying, and grief. Ninety-two percent of participants said that the scripture aids them in the grieving process. This portion of the group slightly increased from the 85% that said the same at the start of this project. The change in percentages seems to be attributed to the fact that some of the participants did not understand the possible impact of scripture until they experienced this sermon series. The combination of the sermons and the discussions modeled for them how helpful biblical truths can be during the guiding force needed to navigate during times of difficulty.

There was just one individual that believed that the scriptures had no major impact in their grief journey. This participant believed that there needed to be only practical information offered for those that are grieving. Their fundamental belief was that scripture was theoretical and not practical. For them, scripture was more inspirational than instructional. Those that believed that the scriptures help in times of grief believe the opposite. They believe that the Bible is both inspirational and instructional.

Another take-away is the fact that sermon series opens up the door for more conversations among those that are dealing with grief. It becomes the necessary permission to have difficult dialogue and to ask questions that are otherwise left to the strange wandering thoughts of many. One participant asked, 'will we ever get to the place of acceptance?' This was their reality; this was their true internal concern for years. It was not until after the concentrated time of this focus that they were able to openly ask the question. The trend that is noteworthy from this is centered around asking questions. Asking the question, whatever it may be, is normal and healthy. Throughout the four post-sermon discussions, six of the thirteen participants, that is 46% of the group, asked a personal, heartfelt question. On top of this, it should be noted that leaving that same question unanswered is also acceptable. The effectiveness of the questions is not simple in receiving answers, but in the question itself. Voicing the concern or area that causes sustained grief makes the questioning worth it.

These trends showed that there is value in a sermon series' impact on those dealing with death, dying, and grief. Each of the trends exhibited differing levels of impact but they all pointed to overall positive impact, nonetheless. Therefore, pastors should consider preaching sermons on this topic to gain some form of positive strides within their congregation as they seek to offer healthy help.

A Few Anecdotal Results

Anecdotal evidence is usually based on individual experiences or observation. These stories serve as additional support to the statistics presented beforehand. The goal

is to bring a full picture of the pastors' sermon series on death and grief to bear. Each narrative will serve as supplemental proof of the sermon series' effectiveness.

Story of a Participant's Friend Whose Husband Died

One of the leaders who participated in this project shared about the tragedy of a friend who just experienced the loss of her husband. This friend was invited to view the sermon series via online streaming. Hesitantly, the friend consented to the request and tuned in. The impact on the friend's life ended up being more than expected. She understood that it was ok for her not to have had a linear process. Her grief was justified and simply needed to find God's love through it all. The affirmation of God being in the same place that she was in was helpful. This friend shared, through messages delivered by the leader who participated, that she was in a very dark place because of how she was feeling internally and the external pressure to have no visible sign of grief. She stopped fellowshiping with other believers and attending church. This was mainly because she felt that no one gave her the needed space to be able to grieve and be where she was in that process.

After the first sermon that dealt with sovereign silence this friend reported that she felt a weight being lifted off her. Hearing this was helpful, and I offered additional support to the necessity of dealing with this difficult topic from the pulpit. Sensitizing members and other congregants and listeners to the topic of death is important. The reach of these sermons, as in this case, are likely to go beyond the ears of the initial intended audience.

Story of a Participant Whose Brother Died

Another participant of the group shared about the experience and aftermath of the death of their brother. This participant had a lingering feeling of confusion about the details concerning their brother's transition and about death in general. During the post-sermon session after the third sermon, this participant talked about how biblical truths and realities about the state of loved one after earthly death offered them needed clarity. They expressed that for the first time, after twenty-three years of internal questions, they were able to see what the scriptures said about the death of a believer. The distinguishing between the physical and the spiritual is what really helps in this instance. Continued spiritual life even in the face of physical death gave them the internal peace that they needed.

This participant also noted that this text had been referenced many times throughout their church life experiences. They even mention how it was referenced at the funeral of their loved one. However, the truth of these biblical principles was never fully grasped until this time of intentional focus on this topic.

The question was then asked about what they thought the difference was that allowed for the concepts to be embraced at this time. Their response revealed information that should serve as guidance for anyone wishing to offer healthy and effective help for the bereaved. They responded saying that each time a biblical text regarding death was mentioned to them, it was during a time when the feeling of grief was heavy and clearly visible to most people. They believe that receptivity was low because there were many other emotional issues pulling for their attention. They suggested that moments of intense grief are not the best time to hear or comprehend anything meaningful. At those

moments, most things come in one ear and go out the other; they never find a grounding place.

Presenting biblical truths relating to death certainly needs to be done at the right time. The takeaway result from this anecdotal detail is that frequent sermon series on death should take place to allow congregants the opportunity to hear what the scripture have to instruct and inform concerning such. In this way, death would become less of an unknown and uncomfortable topic as people are sensitized to the discussion. Preaching about grief would then become less of a matter of crisis, but normal, natural, and necessary.

Along with this truth is the fact that there is really no way to determine when a person's heart and mind are prepared to receive biblical truth concerning death, dying, and grieving. In the case of the grieving participant mentioned above, it could be that the ground of their heart was not fertile enough to receive the truth until this point. Because of this possibility, it would be beneficial for there to be regular discussion, and more preaching, about death, dying, and grief so that the likelihood of the discussion or sermon being presented at the right time is increased. By the aid of God's Holy Spirit, the right message will be preached at the right time to impact the right person.

Story of Participant and Mother

This participant's mother was stuck somewhere in between acceptance and denial. They felt like they were being pulled to a place of radical acceptance where they would never have room for denial. This uncomfortable position was in contradiction to where

they were. “Do you ever fully reach acceptance?” This was the question that kept surfacing in their minds.

While the participant was dealing with the difficulty of the death, their mother was to an even greater degree. The mother also seemed to hang somewhere in between acceptance and denial, with the exception being that the mother spent far more time and dwelled a lot closer to the denial side. This mother would still speak to her deceased husband. She would operate in daily routines as if her husband was still around to be impacted by such. Knowing how to deal with their own grief and the behavior of their mother put the participant in a hard situation. They wanted a different experience but did not know what to do. The participant did not want their mother not to remember daddy; but they did not want her not to remember God either. When the sermon series mentioned that the person of Jesus was readily available and present with them right in the place where they currently found themselves, that was the message that this participant needed to hear. It was the needed assurance for them. They were also hopeful that this was what was needed by their grieving mother. The participant left the sessions with a game plan to address and support their mother through her grieving process.

Story of Participant who has Been a Minister for Years and Felt Inadequate

One of the ministers who serve as leader in the ministry participated in the post sermon discussions. During that session it was indicated how helpful the sermon series was. Out of all the years of preaching, and consoling others who were dealing with grief, the strategies presented never crossed their mind. This participant shared that they often felt inadequate when faced with families dealing with death and grief. Having been in

ministry for over twenty years, the participant confessed there was still this area where the feeling of being ill-equipped was always present. Not being well equipped in knowledge of this area, this minister often found safety in leaning on cliches to be their support.

After hearing these sermons, the minister that participated in the project felt that they understood that there was no need to rest on untruths to try and make the bereaved feel better. They arrived at a place where they are better aware of how to handle those who are grieving.

Conclusion

Overall, this project did indeed affirm that if pastors offer periodic, systematic preaching about death, dying, and grief, via sermon series, that congregants will be better equipped to deal with the concept of death, dying, and grief. While the positive results are only the beginning of what the full impact of the preaching could have, it was a promising start.

Key Recommendations

As a result of the information gleaned from the participants and their expressed views about the impact of the sermon series, several recommendations have been compiled. The first set of recommendations are for pastors of churches. In this instance, the goal is to tool the pastor with several ideas or concepts that might aid them in performing the task of supporting congregations and communities that suffer with major grief. Many pastors may feel some hesitancy to approach this difficult topic, therefore the

hope is that the presented recommendations will give the needed support to overcome this hesitancy.

Then there will be recommendations of churches. In a combined effort, pastors, leaders, and members should seek to push the normalcy of discussion of the topic of death, dying, and grief. This must be a collective effort if it is to have widespread effect on the entire congregation. Everyone's buy-in is needed. Below there will be recommendations for this.

Finally, are recommendations for ministry leaders who certainly are on the front line of interacting with those that are bereaved and grieving. The below-mentioned suggestions serve as the beginning of possible rules of engagement for those that truly seek to have a positive impact on others who might be dealing with grief.

Recommendations for pastors are to preach about death at least yearly. Do not attempt to ease the blow with covered truth. Pastors should be willing to refer out to clinical counseling. Recommendations for churches are to give space for discussion and plan services that provide times of remembrance. Finally, recommendations for Ministry Leaders are to talk about death and listen to others share their stories. It is also important to understand grief language (control, cry, conceal, complain, calm, confusion).

All these recommended actions have surfaced because of the sermon series and discussion that took place at the New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando and believed to be valuable to many churches. Without a doubt, a pastor's systematic preaching on the topic of death, dying, and grief can address the unhealthy help that tends to plague the African American church. Fortunately, there is help for this reality and the help is the preaching and discussion of the biblical perspective of death and the grieving process.

APPENDIX A

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY INFORMED CONSENT FORM

United Theological Seminary Informed Consent Form

Investigator Name: Leroy Rose III

Contact Information: revleroyrose@gmail.com/ [REDACTED]

Introduction:

I am a doctoral student at United Theological Seminary and am conducting a study entitled: Addressing Unhealthy Help through Pastoral preaching's impact on a congregation's grief process.

Purpose:

I am conducting a study to gather and examine information surrounding this primary thought: If a select group of NCBC ministry leaders participate in a sermon series & post sermon workshops aimed at helping parishioners grieve in a healthy way, then these ministry leaders will be equipped to help parishioners process the grief they experience because of death.

Requirements for Participation:

You are invited because you are a member/leader of the New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando and you have some experience with the topic of death, dying and grief.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to:

- Make A six-week commitment (in person or virtual).
- Engage 4 weeks of sermons on healthy grieving.
- Attend one-hour in person or zoom sessions for post sermon discussions.
- Complete pre- and post-questionnaires & weekly audio/video journal.

Risks:

Discussions and participation in the data collections might cause triggering as certain experiences are remembered. These triggers may enact feelings of sadness and/or discomfort. Please use any learned coping mechanism or seek such if this is the case. Pastoral and professional counseling will be available if needed.

Benefits:

Participation in this focus group study might assist the participants in processing grief and will aid in creating future content that might assist others as well.

Voluntariness:

Participation is voluntary and you may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. You can also stop participating at any time. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your membership or standing at the New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando. If something makes you feel uncomfortable in any way while you are in the study, please

contact me directly in person, on the phone, or electronic communication. My contact information is at the top of this consent form. You can refuse to respond to any or all of the questions, and you will be able to withdraw from the process at any time.

Confidentiality:

We will be careful to keep your information confidential, and we will ask you and all the focus group members to keep the discussion confidential as well. There is always a small risk of unwanted or accidental disclosure. The conversations and the focus groups will be recorded and transcribed only with this permission. Any notes, recordings, or transcriptions will be kept private. I will be the only one with access to your information. The files will be encrypted and password protected. Your name will not be used; you will be assigned an identifying label. For every submitted piece of data and during discussions, please use your assigned label. As a secondary means of redaction,

Summary:

If you have any questions about the research study please contact me or one of the context associates at do4048312@gmail.com / “LeroyRose Doctoral”

.

Signature:

Print Name
Project/Study

Signature of Person Agreeing to Date Signed Participate in the

(Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be mad if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.)

APPENDIX B
PRE- AND POST-QUESTIONNAIRE

Focus Group Study
"Pastoral Preaching's Impact on Death, Dying & Grief Process"
Pre- and Post-Questionnaire

1. How do you define "grief"?
2. In what ways does grief manifest itself?
3. How do you define "grief that is associated or caused by death"?
4. Are there any differences between how you define "grief" by itself and "grief that is associated or caused by death"?
5. What have been your experiences with grief associated with or caused by death?
6. Did you receive professional counseling for this grief? If yes, what methods or actions did professional counseling teach you or otherwise expose you to help you process your grief in a healthy way? If no, why have you not yet sought professional counseling for the grief you are currently experiencing?
7. How has the church helped you understand death's role in the life of a Christian disciple and steward?
8. If the church has not helped you understand death's role in the life of a Christian disciple and steward, then what can the church do to change this?

APPENDIX C

POST-SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Focus Group Study
"Pastoral Preaching's Impact on Death, Dying & Grief Process"
Post-Sermon Discussion
Guiding Questions

1. Were you able to identify the key concepts from today's sermon?

What was the concept and how did it aid you in the grieving process
or your understanding of grief?

2. What change will you implement in your ministry of supporting other
grieving members of NCBC?

APPENDIX D

FOCUSED JOURNALING QUESTIONS

Focus Group Study
"Pastoral Preaching's Impact on Death, Dying & Grief Process"
Focused Journaling Questions

Week 1.

Have you experienced the death of a loved one? How recently? How much are you having trouble accepting the death of your loved one?

Week 2.

How much does your grief interfere with your daily living? Are there any seasons of life when it is difficult to operate as you normally would because of the death of a loved one or the thought thereof?

Week 3.

During your previous time of grief, how comforted have you felt because of the ministry of the church?

Week 4.

Do the scriptures aid you in your grieving process?

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